



Mills & Boon

THE PASSIONATE SINNER

Violet Winspear



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What, Merlin Lakeside wondered, could she do with the love building inside her? There seemed no way to release it except by just being here... hoping that Paul van Setan wouldn't realize she was the person he had cause to hate.

What would she do with the hate if she suddenly found herself at the mercy of it, deadly in Paul's blind eyes. Sang harimau, the natives called him -- king tiger.

She remembered his question: "Does the word vengeance really appall you, Miss Lakeside?"

CHAPTER ONE

AN island set in a tropical sea, on which dwelt a man who lived his life in darkness ... and here she was, the one who had handed him the eyewash unaware that the nurse had poured something that would cause him instant agony and subsequent blindness.

He had been in surgery for hours, and always at the end of a long and delicate operation he rinsed out his strained eyes with a harmless but soothing lotion. The nurse mixed it, handed the little eye-cup to her assistant, and returned her attention to the checking of the instruments which had been used by the surgeon. He had tipped back his head and blinked the lotion first into his left eye, then into his right one ... a moment later letting out a dreadful choked cry.

They did everything possible to save his sight ... the entire incident was tragic and terrible for Paul van Setan and the terrified girl who had handed him the eyewash.

Somehow in the ensuing panic and blame, the young assistant found herself in the position of the accused. It was her fault entirely, the older nurse said at the hospital inquiry. It was the girl's job to ensure that there was never a mix-up of bottles in the surgery, and in all innocence the wrong lotion had been poured out for eyewash. Then the whispering began ... everyone knew, excepting Paul van Setan, that the girl was head over heels in love with him, but he never even noticed if she was alive. Plain girls who fell for a man who never noticed them ... well, wasn't there an old saying about a woman scorned?

The other nurse had a certain glamour, the doctors were sympathetic towards her, and blame fell like a clap of doom on the quiet, unassuming student nurse.

They curtly dismissed her and she had to find employment that was less congenial to her ... but what did anything matter anymore?

It was many months later that by merest chance she learned that the Dutch surgeon, who had performed such miracles with the scalpel on the shattered faces and bodies of his patients, was living far away in the tropics. The island was owned by a wealthy man whose son, badly burned in a speedboat accident, had been restored to health and humanity by the skill of the man whose precious sight was now gone. Never again would those extraordinary hands and keen sight combine to heal someone; they had been as sure and gifted as if a great artist worked in detail on steel or wood. Paul had worked with flesh and bone, carving what had seemed impossibly ruined back into the shape of a face, restoring a shattered limb to usefulness, or rebuilding a hip so the sufferer might walk again.

But he couldn't restore his own lost sight, and he could no longer help his patients. He could only decide, after months of recuperation on a tropical island, to write for others in the surgical field a book on the art of restoration surgery. But he needed someone to assist him, a secretary who would understand the medical terms and be able to spell correctly the mystic words.

And the girl they had condemned, who had in fact come to think of herself as the one who had ruined him, wanted that job as she had never wanted anything in her life before ... except to see Paul van Setan no longer blind, which seemed a wish as far out of reach as the

stars in the sky.

The incredible part was that she stood an excellent chance of landing the job, for not even her name could ring a bell of painful remembrance in the mind of the surgeon.

When she was a young child her father had died and some months later her mother had married an old sweetheart. Quite naturally she had wanted her daughter to use his name and the girl had done so to please her mother, but now out of the blue had come this chance to go and work for Paul, and that was of far more importance than respect for the sentimental wishes of two people who were quite content to live their lives without her. With this in mind she set about having her baptismal name restored on her employment cards and all other documents she would need to go and work abroad. When her letter of application, along with details of her secretarial abilities, was sent off to faraway Pulau-Indah it was signed with a name Paul wouldn't know or remotely connect with his dreadful accident.

Dropped was the plain middle name of Jane, which she had always used because her first name sounded so fanciful for someone like herself, and the letter was signed Merlin Lakeside.

And now Merlin stood on a sweep of airfield above the glitter of the ocean, where lateen-sailed boats made bright etchings against the incredible horizon.

Somewhere out there, across those opalescent waters, lay Pulau-Indah—the beautiful island—and her fingers tightened on the handle of her overnight bag, for she was being flown by helicopter to Paul van Setan's house on the island and the rest of her baggage was already aboard one of those colourful boats.

Then, her senses very highly strung at this moment, she felt rather than saw the approach of the pilot from around the side of the scarlet and white steel bubble that was to fly her off to her first meeting with Paul since that awful, heart-shattering day in surgery.

The young man was Indonesian and he wished her '*Goede dag*,' in Dutch, at the same time flicking a look of inquiry over her slim figure in the cool shirtwaister she had bought in London. Her eyes were hidden away behind the large lenses of sun-glasses, and her hair was scooped back into a nape-knot that concealed its tawny-brown colour, rather like that of a tortoiseshell cat. Since she had flown out by jet straight from the cold English wintertime her skin was startling white to the gaze of the helicopter pilot, whose own colouring was that of very dark hair and warm brown skin, his eyes like crescents of black jade above his high cheekbones.

'We are now ready to take off, *nonya*,' he said. 'May I take your bag for you?'

He spoke good English and that was a relief. Merlin smiled and shook her head.

'I can manage, *terima kasih*.'

'Ah, so you learn a few words of the island language,' he said, a sudden glitter of interest in his eyes, as if before she spoke he had decided that she was rather prim, proper and colourless, 'It is always wise when going to foreign places, for there can be misunderstandings, can there not?'

She nodded, and yet felt that there had been almost an amused sort of mockery in his

words, and she recalled her own reflections on the plane coming here, that there was room for gossip in an unmarried man of Paul's age being host as well as employer to a single girl of her years.

Merlin was twenty-one but inclined to look rather younger, and she knew that Paul was thirty-six. That he had not yet married was in some ways remarkable, but he had been entirely devoted to his work, though at the hospital it had been known that he had a couple of attractive and socially well-placed women in his private life. But there had never been any talk of a binding relationship and the assumption was that he would eventually marry someone who would understand and adorn his career. In the meantime he had obviously been content to put his work before personal happiness, and that he had his working base in England was associated with the fact that he had trained under the eminent Sir Ivor Cliveland. There had been rumours of the two men going into partnership and forming their own clinic ... but now that hope was crushed out of existence, and Merlin felt an actual physical torment at knowing she had been partly instrumental in bringing Paul's brilliant career to a dark end.

As she walked with the pilot to the helicopter she silently prayed that Paul would never find out that she had been the nurse who had placed that fatal eyewash in his hand ... yet she also wondered if in some strange way she came to him in the hope of not only making amends but of being punished at his hands.

She was at times desperately aware of what had been said about her at the time of the accident ... that she was in love with Paul van Setan and he had ignored her.

A hand gripped her elbow and helped her into the helicopter seat; a pair of earphones were handed to her, for these flying bubbles were noisy and in order to hear the pilot when he spoke to her it was necessary that she wear them. This being so it was also necessary that she remove her smoked glasses.

'Comfortable, *nonya?*' He turned to look at her and a sudden gleam came into his eyes, for in the confines of the cabin he was close to her and looking into her large reflective eyes that were the texture of blown violas with a dash of honey, with at the corner of her left eye a tiny dark mole. Her face seemed quiet, but to the imaginative mind her mouth was like a soft red flower against her clear skin.

A girl most men passed by in their search for what they considered more passionate, vivacious, and ready to be responsive.

But this young man was Indonesian and he suddenly stared deep into Merlin's eyes and a curious little smile edged his lips. 'You knew the *tuan besar* before he got blinded, eh?'

'No.' She shook her head in swift, and inwardly frightened, denial. 'I've come out to be his secretary—to help him write his book.'

'Then you don't know the sort of man he is, *nonya?*'

'No,' she said again, and in a way this was true, for she had only seen him as a brilliant surgeon; she had never known him as a blinded man, and possibly an embittered one.

'Be warned, Miss Lakeside.' The helicopter swung into the air with a movement as of

a scimitar slicing into the throat. 'He can be a tiger, that one, for all that he cannot see in daylight. But at night it is different and he can walk the jungle as even a native would not dare, with hearing as acute as the creatures of the dark. As you know, he was a great man in the world beyond these waters, and even yet he uses his hands as a doctor when the need is urgent.

His senses are more acute than yours or mine, and it is a wonder to see him walk as if he isn't blind, sometimes almost into a huge palm tree, when he will pull up quite suddenly, as if with his very skin and the hair on it he can feel the tree growing there. The islanders fear him a little, but they also look up to him. *Sang Harimau*, they call him.'

'And what does it mean?' Merlin could feel the thudding of her heart under the cool material of her dress, under which she wore but a slip and matching briefs.

She had known it would be warm out here, but at this moment she felt a trickle of ice through her veins.

'King Tiger,' said the pilot. 'The one who sees in the dark, who swims where the shark swims, and has no fear. There are girls on the island who would lay themselves at his feet, but he doesn't see them with his eyes or his heart. There is a great coldness in him. *nonya*. A burning coldness as of the tiger who hunts what has hurt him.'

Merlin shivered and didn't dare to look at the pilot. She gazed down instead and saw that deep emerald jungle was giving way to the shining surface of the sea, and a sense of apprehension took a tighter grip on her, for she had thought of an island as a place of drowsy lagoons, rippling surf and the drooping fronds of palm trees. This was much more primitive than that, a place lost out of time, where the ways of the modern world would not have reached. The liberation of woman and the dying idea that men were meant to dominate!

The Paul van Setan she had known did not fit into the tigerskin this young Indonesian had flung around his personality. She thought of him striding into surgery, gowned and hooded, and utterly certain of what he was about to do to the unconscious figure on the operating table ... he was going to give back hope and form to something torn by metal or scarred by flame.

But a tiger ... that sleek and dangerous animal prowled the night and made people afraid.

No, she wouldn't ... couldn't believe that Paul had changed so much, from a civilised man of mercy to a primitive brute. If that were true then he would hardly be sending for a secretary to help him with a book that might pass on to others some of the skill and dedication he had put into his work.

No, this young man at her side might have a veneer of worldliness, but at heart he was still an islander, and such people dealt in myth and used rare terms to describe people. They no doubt referred to Paul in that way because he had always been a striking man to look at, with a superb bodily co-ordination that had made it possible for him to stand the strain of those long operations, his hands at the completion of them as steady as they had been at the start.

Only his eyes had ever made an aching protest... his steel-grey eyes from which the

precious sight had been struck that awful haunting afternoon, after long hours of rebuilding the entire side of an injured woman's face.

'Now,' he had smiled, 'she will be able to face a mirror again.' Then he had turned to Merlin and accepted from her hand the small white eye-cup ... and still her heart echoed with that tortured cry ... oh God, like the howling of a tiger as the moon went dark.

'What is it—what is the matter?'

The helicopter pilot was speaking to her and she gave him a look she didn't fully realise was desperate and anguished.

'You groaned,' he said. 'Does flying in this cage make you feel sick?'

'A—a little,' she lied. 'It's my first time.'

'Of course, but soon we will be landing, and no doubt you are feeling in need of a cup of tea.' He broke into a smile that showed even white teeth. 'The British they are very fond of tea, eh? We grow it on the island and a cousin of the *tuan* is overseer of the plantation. They are Dutchmen, of course, and perhaps you thought that this part of the world had rid itself of the white boss?'

'I did rather think so,' she admitted. 'But isn't the island owned by someone quite rich, who owed Mynheer van Setan a rather big favour?'

'That is so. A government officer of high standing, of one of the old royal houses. As in your country, *nonya*, we are inclined still to respect the blue blood.'

She smiled a little in return. 'It was good of him to let Mynheer van Setan reside on the island. Paul—he must have needed a kind of haven after.' Her smile was lost and her face was losing its control. 'It's always sad, isn't it, to hear of a man like that going blind? He must have had so much to give.'

'Be warned not to show pity,' the pilot said. 'He won't stand for it. He has the will of iron and in many respects one would take him for a sighted man. You know, Miss Lakeside, I am surprised by something.'

'And what is that?' she asked.

'You are much younger than we thought you would be. The *tuan* said to me only this morning, fly to the mainland and pick up a lady who is coming to work for me, and be polite and helpful, for middle-aged English spinsters are rather circumspect.' The young Indonesian gave Merlin what could only be termed a very old-fashioned look. 'I have seen English maiden ladies in my time at college, *nonya*. They were not half so youthful, nor had they skin like the inside of the oyster-shell.'

Merlin blushed, right down into the neat neckline of her dress, where the heat spread and pooled in her collarbone. It wasn't only that she was a stranger to flattery, but she felt riddled with guilt, well aware that in writing to Paul van Setan she had deliberately made the tone and style of her application rather old-fashioned, so that anyone reading it to him would impart the nuances of a staid woman to whom work was of more importance than a social life.

It had taken Merlin several hours to get the *tonejai* her letter just right, using the language of a bookish woman who had very little else but work in her life.

That blush burned her skin, for Paul had obviously got the message and believed her to be a mature person of middle years, and all she could hope was that being blind he wouldn't realise that she was far younger than she had led him to believe. There would hardly be any physical contact between them, and she had a low, softly modulated voice that shouldn't give her away.

But the helicopter pilot was in a position to do so, and she just had to appeal to him.

'You won't say anything, will you, about the fact that I'm younger than he thought? I—I very much wanted the post, you see. I longed to travel, but there was no hope of coming this far afield unless I took work in this part of the world.

You do understand, don't you?'

'Do I, *nonya*?' His smile was subtle and wholly foreign. 'To me there is mystery in a young woman travelling thousands of miles to a strange island to be among people who will find her strange in return. You are not the sort that a man sees in the Far Eastern capitals, a woman of wealth who travels to pass the time, a good-time girl who takes work as a nightclub hostess, or a member of a religious order in the nursing profession.'

His dark, elongated eyes flicked her mouth and saw the tiny nerve that pulsed there, he took in her hands that were gripping the handle of her bag with an unnatural tension, and then he swung the throttle of the helicopter engine and they began to descend, nearer and nearer to a glistening strip of beach that had suddenly appeared on the edge of the ocean.

'I never approach the *tuan* with tales,' he said. 'If you have a secret, then it is your concern, but beware of *him*. His senses are abnormally acute and he may well guess that you are a bit of girl instead of a stolid maiden lady. We have a saying, Folly always demands a penalty.'

'You think I've been a fool in coming here?' Her heartbeats quickened as the helicopter dropped smoothly towards the pale stretch of sand, curving away like the undulating tail of a snake, out from among the trees, through a towering archway of black rocks to where the sea pounded.

The helicopter settled, a moment of shrill noise and then abrupt silence as the rotors came to a stop. The pilot turned to face her, peeling off his earphones as he did so. A jag of black hair was sharp against his smooth coffee skin. 'A pebble and a diamond are alike to a blind man, as we say, but Tuan Paul has never been an ordinary man and it is well known in this part of the world that he worked upon the oil-burned face of a boy, the son of the man who owns this island, and made it good to look at again. If there should be harm to him in your arrival among us, then you would be wise to leave before I take you to him.'

'How could I possibly want to harm such a man?' Merlin gasped, feeling the deep twist of pain, the sudden grip of fear, the realisation that she would be in peril from these people if they ever discovered her secret.

'Women are creatures of intrigue and no man really knows if his heart is safe in the hands of a woman. Your eyes, Miss Lakeside, are not easy to read. They are impenetrable like a forest flower, and they are shadowed when your lashes veil them. I can see you, but I don't know you. The *tuan* will not see you, but to his fingers a pebble will not feel like a

diamond.'

'A-and what is that supposed to mean?' Merlin asked, nervously.

'Just this, *nonya*, don't get too close to him.' The pilot swung open the exits of the machine and Merlin alighted before he could come and assist her. He had unnerved her with his remarks and the way he seemed to guess that there was more to her being here than the mere wish to satisfy an urge to travel. She could feel a tremor in her legs as she stood there on the hot sand that was like crushed shell and replaced her sun-glasses in order to offset the dazzle and to hide her eyes from the young Indonesian. Fear couldn't be altogether concealed and she could feel it in herself ... the mounting apprehension of what faced her within the next few minutes ... her meeting with Paul van. Setan for the first time in months.

King Tiger, whom she had been warned not to approach too closely.

'Have we far to go to reach the house?' she asked. 'Is it a big house?'

'It's the island residence,' he replied, a flicker of amusement in his eyes as he indicated a rock stairway that led up from the sands to a plateau above them.

'Up there?' she said, frowning. 'Does that mean that Mynheer van Setan makes his way down that stairway? Isn't that rather dangerous for him?'

'He gives no thought to the danger, *nonya*.'

'I see.' She swallowed drily and wondered if Paul was careless of his life because he considered that he had very little to live for since being cut off from his life's work. Oh God, this was going to be harder than she had dreamed of, being here with him and having to endure the sight of him stumbling around, beholden to other people for the small things that sighted people took for granted, not caring very much if he plunged down those rocks and broke his neck.

'He has a small island boy who leads him down,' the pilot drawled, as if reading her mind. 'You could not keep the tuan away from the sea, even though for him there is the danger of not seeing the silent approach of the tiger shark.'

We islanders go into the water with a knife strapped to the hip, but the strange part is that he has been swimming in our sea ever since he came here and the shark has not yet attacked him. Perhaps being blind he cannot exude the fear or panic that sighted people cannot suppress when danger comes close to them, and maybe the primitive shark senses that he shares the sea with someone who swims in total darkness.'

She shuddered at the words and tried to picture that tall, assured man of medicine living a life so primitive, so far removed from the clinical environs of the hospital where he had been a kind of god to those he healed and those he worked with. Paul van Setan, the most brilliant young surgeon Sir Ivor Cliveland had ever trained and who would have carried on the tradition ... and who was now a kind of blind beachcomber who in need of something to occupy his keen mind had hit upon the idea of writing a casebook and outlining the methods he had used in his restoration of the human face and body.

The tragedy of it struck through Merlin like a knife and as she stood looking about her, a hand was pressed tightly to her side.

'You are all right?' A hand touched her shoulder and she gave a start and found the

Indonesian pilot close to her.

'Yes.' She tensed at his touch. 'I—I'm taking in the strangeness of everything, and I do feel slightly nervous. Do you think he'll mind terribly if he discovers that I'm a young woman?'

'You had better let him first discover that you are a good worker.' The white teeth gleamed against the coffee skin. 'Then when the whispers reach him ...'

'The whispers?' Her breath caught in her throat.

'A *nona*, a young single girl in the house of a bachelor!' His black eyebrows quirked. 'On an island everything is known, everything is discussed, and you are very attractive.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' she gasped, jerking away from him. 'I'm not at all the type of girl that men look at.'

'He will not be looking, will he, *nonya*?' The foreign voice was insinuating.

'He will be attuned to your voice, which is low and pleasing, and at some time his blind hand will brush against you.'

'How dare you speak like this!' Merlin felt that she had gone ashen, for his words struck at hidden and forbidden feelings deep inside her. It actually made her feel a little faint, the idea of one of Paul's lean clever hands coming in contact with her body. She swayed and clenched her hand against the scaly trunk of a nearby tree. 'I—I'm not used to this amount of heat,' she said me infernal island of the devil's.'

'Perhaps you have, *nonya*.'

'Yes, perhaps I have.' She wanted to sink down on the sand and fall weakly into the shadow of the palm tree, and that would be childish of her. She was here on Pulau-Indah and must face the consequences of her own foolhardy action in coming all this way to be with a man whose life was blighted because of her. She might as well have handed him hemlock and then at least he would have dropped dead and not been condemned to a walking darkness.

'Come,' a hand closed upon her arm. 'The afternoon is closing in and the sun is waning and you will find that the evenings on the island are a thing of magic.'

Come, let me take you to the Tiger House.'

'Are you being funny?' she exclaimed.

'Not in the least,' he replied. 'That is the name of the residence—it was so named by the owner and, of course, it does have its significance in view of what the islanders call the *tuan*, but we are a people wrapped up in myth and symbol.'

We don't take for granted the whims of fate, nor the joys and sorrows. We know that most things are ordained and that to fight against what fate has in store for us is a waste of energy. Don't waste energy, for it is quite a climb.'

'Couldn't you have landed on the headland?' she asked, as they began to climb the rock stairs side by side.

'There is only a strip of land leading around the rim of the tea valley,' he informed her. 'It would be a very aromatic landing but a costly one.'

'If there's a valley, how do we reach the—Tiger House?' She was intrigued despite her

various fears. There was no denying the colour and strangeness of the island, and if fate had her on a chain, what else could she do but submit to being led into the tiger's den?

'We cross a bamboo bridge,' he said, 'slung across the tea valley to the gates of the house. It is somewhat like a fortress, for in the old days the Chinese pirates used to come raiding in search of girls and spices and teakwood. The island has a history, *nonya*.'

I sense that strongly,' she breathed, and into her nostrils as they climbed towards the rim of the valley came the rich scent of the tea bushes, mingling with the spice trees that still grew here, and the slightly scorched smell of sun-burned palms, so tall that they caught the full blast of the sun rays.

Her heart beat fast from a combination of exertion, excitement, and fear.

Very soon now, she would see again the man whom as a student nurse she had worshipped from across the chasm that separates the surgery dogsbody from the surgeon himself. Young and so romantic in those days, she had sometimes thought that it would be lovely to have an unexpected adventure with Paul van Setan, such as being trapped alone with him in the express lift of the tall hospital building, when he would look into her eyes and discover that she was a real live girl instead of just a pair of willing hands. ..

The sharp pangs of memory clawed at her ... willing hands that in their youthful, unknowing eagerness had blinded him, the one man in all the world she would have served with her body and soul had he asked for them.

CHAPTER TWO

IT stood among the spice and camphor trees, with a great lofty veranda standing on palm pillars, and with an enormous thatched roof so thick it had a carved look. It stood back from a courtyard set round with stone lanterns and with a central fountain like a petrified lotus, and Merlin stood gazing at the house in spellbound wonder. It sprang complete from the colonial days when the Dutch had lorded it over these islanders, the spicemasters, the tea-planters, never brutal in their treatment but ruling with the iron hand in the gauntlet.

The casuarinas whispered, long-lost echoes of a past that still seemed to prevail as Merlin walked with the young Indonesian towards the steps of the veranda.

There she paused and felt the shakiness in her legs ... now there was no turning back and she was committed to whatever fate had in store for her in the shape of Paul van Setan.

'What do you think, Miss Lakeside?' The pilot stood there with one foot on the veranda steps, studying her pale face and frowning a little as if he wanted to see behind the big rims of her sun-glasses. 'Do you like your first glimpse of the Tiger House?'

'It's very striking,' she said. 'Very much in the old style.'

'Things don't change quickly on islands, *nonya*. Attitudes of mind remain fixed like dragonflies in amber. Are you sure you want to venture inside the house of *Sang Harimau*?'

There was a long moment of silence on her part, while deep in the trees the cicadas went on chirring and the tendrilled leaves of the casuarinas went on whispering. She knew then that she was being offered a choice and that if she took the coward's way this young man would take her back to the helicopter and return her to the mainland.

'Is that you, Lon?' The voice came suddenly, breaking in on the silence between Merlin and the pilot. 'You have brought with you the lady from England?'

Merlin felt as if her legs were going to buckle beneath her, for she had recognised that deep and faintly accented voice immediately, and she knew that when she turned to the left side of the house she would see Paul van Setan standing there. Too late ... too late, cried a small mocking voice in her mind. Now she couldn't run away!

'Ja, mynheer.' Lon swivelled his lean body and Merlin knew that he was looking full at the man she must face in the next few seconds. She had never felt so afraid and yet so eager ... she longed to feast her eyes on Paul and yet she retreated from seeing his blinded eyes, even though she knew they would be covered. A barb of iron seemed to fly into her throat and she flung up a hand as if to stifle that choked feeling.

'All is well?' Paul asked, as if his acute senses had detected in the atmosphere something that put him on the alert. 'Miss Lakeside had a satisfactory journey?'

'I am sure she did, *mynheer*.' The pilot replied for her, but Merlin knew the fatal moment had come for her to turn and speak, and become an actual presence to the man who couldn't see her.

Very slowly she turned around, fighting for composure so her voice wouldn't shake when she spoke to him. 'I had a very good journey, Mynheer van Setan.'

Your pilot has been very kind to me.'

She watched breathlessly as that white-gold head slightly tilted, as if he were taking the measure of her voice and judging from it her height and disposition.

Her heart ached and she was shaken to see that his eyes weren't hidden away behind dark glasses. She retreated a step as if they could see her, gazing directly at her from that deeply tanned face, with the proud flare to the nostrils, with a definition both strong and commanding in the mouth and jawline.

A flame seemed to burn at the core of his eyes, a flickering illusion of being sighted. If there had been burn scars they had gone, and she knew the reason why.

Sir Ivor Cliveland had done all he could for Paul at the time of the accident, and all he had been able to do was use his skill with the scalpel to restore to the steel-grey eyes the semblance of their keen, penetrating quality; to make them look as Merlin remembered them, deep-set, rather slanting, their heavy lids adding a sensuousness that now seemed more evident.

'How do you do, Miss Lakeside?' He approached her with a firm tread, as if he knew every inch of the courtyard, his hand held out to welcome her. 'I hope you will soon find yourself at home on our island, which will seem strange to you at first.'

Merlin had placed her slender hand in that outstretched one a second before she realised the pilot's warning about not allowing Paul to touch her. Her heart turned over, or it seemed to, as she felt the tensile fingers playing over hers, feeling their fine bones, their smooth skin, that lack of prominent veining in the hands of older women.

'Being blind has its difficulties, as you can see, Miss Lakeside.' He deliberately turned her hand and she felt his fingertips travelling her palm, finding the life lines and the mound below her thumb; his touch was exquisite to the point of excruciation, for with this hand she had given him the eye-cup whose contents had poured darkness into his grey eyes.

'We have to employ such methods in our reading of those we must live and work with, so don't mind too much—ah yes, I can feel that you do mind, Miss Lakeside. Tell me, do you play the piano?'

'Why—yes.' She felt that her face was white as the tiny flowers clustering madly down a stone wall beyond Paul's wide shoulders; she didn't as yet know that the flower was frangipani, the temple blossom, because it had such an innocent look.

'Excellent,' he said. 'I hope you will play for me, for I have grown fond of music in my solitude and we have a rather grand piano indoors that we care for like a jewel, is that not so, Lon? Covering it in a sheet of felt in order to safeguard it from the termites and the heat. I hope you are prepared for the heat, Miss Lakeside? You have a very cool skin, but we have a very hot sun, so don't go strolling in it as if this were Hyde Park.'

Her heart gave an awful jolt when he mentioned that part of London ... the hospital had stood within the vicinity of the park and the nurses had been fond of strolling there and rowing on the Serpentine with the young doctors. Her eyes were fixed upon Paul's face and she searched his sightless eyes in panic and fear.

Was it remotely possible that he had guessed who she was ... this hard brown man in the jungle cloth trousers and thin shirt open to his belt. He was no longer the civilised and

humane surgeon. That veneer had been scorched away by pain and long months on an island lost in time.

Mevrouw, have you nothing to say in answer to me?' There was in his voice a note of amusement mingling with a certain indulgence, and the tension began to seep out of Merlin as she realised that he had called her madam in Dutch and was therefore unsuspecting that she was not a maiden lady, whom in his blindness he probably pictured as having an angular body clad in something beige, with her grey hair severely coiffured.

Relief gripped her and a smile made its way to her lips. 'I shall try not to be too much of a fool; *mynheer*. I do realise that I am now on a tropical island and I have come prepared with a big straw hat.'

His lip quirked. 'I had an aunt who always wore a cartwheel gardening hat with a chiffon scarf tied round to hold it to her face. She said the scarf had two functions, to defeat the wind when it blew, and to see that her chin was kept in place if her Maker should call while she pruned her roses. She was in her eighties, but you are not quite that old, eh?'

Merlin felt a momentary spasm of panic when he said that, dispelled when he turned in the direction of Lon, uncannily aware of where the pilot was standing.

'Has Miss Lakeside's baggage arrived?' he asked. 'If so, get Rani to take it to the Jade Room, which has been thoroughly cleaned and polished and made ready for the *mevrouw*.'

Ja, mynheer.' As the pilot made his polite answer he caught Merlin's eye and seemed to glitter a look of warning with his own eyes. For now it was all right, she had fooled a blind man into thinking her the mature type of woman who could share a dwelling with a man in his thirties and not cause speculation; a man who for all the sightless state of his eyes was brown and hard and utterly virile. Lon's look warned her that she was playing with fire; that being deprived of his sight didn't take away from a man all his other senses.

'I will see to it at once,' said Lon, 'that the *mevrouw's* belongings are brought from the boat and carried to her room.' He too had used the word madam, hardly to be applied to someone of Merlin's age, and in doing so he condoned what could only be called a deception. Merlin found she couldn't look at him, and neither could she blurt out the truth to Paul. He might send her packing, and now she had seen him again she didn't want to leave him; there was a poignancy to his blindness, but there was also something so physically exciting about this sun-and sea-hardened man that it would have been sheerest torment to be flown away from him now she had found him again.

'You are quiet, *mevrouw*,' he said suddenly. 'Are you wondering if you have done the wise thing in coming to work for me in what must seem to you a wilderness?'

'I—I am looking about me, *mynheer*, at the exotic trees and plants.' She forced a confident note into her voice, but for just an instant as he spoke his face had looked hard and menacing. What did he imagine, that now she found herself in his presence she was put off by his blindness?

'Yes,' he drawled, 'they must present a very colourful array and I can only guess their beauty by their scent and the feel of them. Do you think you are going to find it unnerving, Miss Lakeside, to work for a man who goes through life as if it were an unending tunnel of

darkness, with no light at the other end; no sudden relief of bursting into the blessed daylight? It can be nerve-racking for the sighted, to be for long periods of time in the company of someone who could go sprawling on his face if a chair or a table were moved only a few inches from then" set positions. Speak up, *mevrouw*. My pilot can always fly you back to civilisation if you feel that the job is going to be too much for you.'

'I don't want to leave,' she said quickly, 'not before I've had a chance to prove to myself and to you that I can do the work—and get accustomed to your blindness. I do assure you that if you fall flat on your face I shan't scream. I'm not the screaming sort.'

'Perhaps you aren't, but have you ever seen a snake gliding across the floor, or heard the clicking of a tarantula a moment before it scurries up the wall? You aren't blind, Miss Lakeside, and you are going to have to live with those things as well.'

'I—I knew that when I applied for the job, *mynheer*.' All the same her skin had crawled. 'But I hope I shall be sensible and not lose my head when I see those things.'

'The tone of your application was sensible,' he said. 'I had almost made up my mind to employ a male secretary, and then your letter arrived and after discussing the matter with my cousin—who at present is taking some leave in Holland—I decided to risk asking you to come here. A blind man, Miss Lakeside, has to depend a great deal on his other senses and I have missed the sound of a woman's voice. Does that strike you as strange?'

'Not in the least, *mynheer*.' Behind the shield of her sun-glasses she allowed the compassion to flood her eyes ... he was fearfully lonely, she realised. The discipline of his surgical days made it as yet impossible for him to take an island girl for his mistress, but he missed having a woman around—all those nurses at his command—that comforting feeling that the feminine aura imparts to men; a certain tenderness and a submission to male strength.

'You have a pleasing voice, *mevrouw*.' he said, just a hint of cool restraint in his voice. 'I am glad about that... it is one of the trademarks of a nurse. Were you ever a nurse?'

That dread question had arrived and there was no evading an honest answer ... in her letter she had implied what he must have assumed, that she had done secretarial work in a hospital.

'I was a nurse for a while,' she admitted. 'I found I hadn't the right temperament, so I left.'

'Too many sessions sluicing out certain containers, eh?' A smile caught at his lips. 'There are aspects to nursing that can be very unglamorous, but it's worthwhile work. A woman has to be dedicated to it, just as a surgeon has to be wed to his scalpel. I was at times a taskmaster, *mevrouw*, to myself and others.'

He drew a deep sigh, and Merlin wished with all her heart that she could run to him and cradle his sun-bleached head against her breast. She wanted to take away the hurt, but she had to stand where she was and act the part of a middle-aged workhorse, a stranger to him who had never seen those strong hands make firm and healing incisions in twisted flesh. Working with him would be a kind of daily rack on which she'd be stretched, torn by being so near to him, denied the relief of burying kisses in his eyes and begging him to forgive her.

‘Afraid I shall be your taskmaster?’ he taunted, as if her silence provoked him and made him curious. ‘There is every possibility, for I’m in virtual charge of this island and the people call me the *tuan besar*, which means the master. My word is law.’

‘I’m sure it is, Mynheer van Setan.’ She made herself sound primly obedient, and didn’t add that Lon had also told her that he had another nickname. There was something lean and dangerous about his body that did put one in mind of a tawny tiger. She could no longer visualise him in one of those perfect grey suits, Hermes tie knotted to perfection against a tailored white shirt, standing there in the express lift as it swept him to the ground floor where his car would be waiting to take him to dinner at the Ritz or the Hilton. More than once she had stood in the same lift with him and he had been entirely unaware of her, locked in thoughts of an operation he had performed, or in anticipation of his date with a charming, well-dressed, entirely civilised woman whose voice would be beautifully modulated, along with her emotions.

Now he lived on a tropical island teeming with spicy scents, lush with wild orchids, rampant with jungle life, and Merlin felt sure there had been brought to the surface of Paul van Setan an awareness of sensual things. His very touch had become acutely sensitive, and she could still feel a residue of tingling where his fingertips had gone over her hand, a sightless seer reading her palm by touch alone.

She gave an uncontrollable shiver, and at once he sensed it. ‘You must be feeling quite exhausted after your long journey, Miss Lakeside, and those stopovers that don’t really bring any relief. Come, we must go indoors and have some tea—our very own tea that we grow in the valley that you would have seen on your way here.’

‘I—I should indeed like a cup of tea,’ she said, glancing round for his pilot and finding that Lon had slipped away, no doubt to see about the sale delivery of her baggage. She had brought with her a portable typewriter, feeling sure that there wouldn’t be a good English machine on the island, and had stocked up as far as her finances would allow on tropical clothing.

‘The tea valley is very beautiful’ she added, ‘and heavenly scented.’

‘Its beauty I must imagine, but its scent is like a gust of heaven, especially so when the sun goes down and the heavy dew of the tropics starts to settle on the tea bushes. That scent will rise to your balcony, Miss Lakeside, for your room overlooks the valley.’

He had paused at the top of the veranda steps as he spoke and Merlin was suddenly aware of being very close to him; she could see in detail the lashes around his sightless eyes and they were darker than his silvery hair. He towered over her and her eyes measured his shoulders and saw their smooth hardness under the open shirt, and the thrust of chest hair going down under his belt. She found herself breathing with a soft rapidity, and felt as if her bones had gone hollow and were being filled with liquid silver. The single flaming truth of that terrible incident of his eyes had been that she loved him, but then it had been a kind of hero-worship, a shy adoration of the clever and confident surgeon, around whom she spun a few impossible dreams, but right now she found herself aware of him in a totally different way. He wasn’t a god or a knight whose sword was a scalpel ... he was a man, and a very

potent one, and she saw the sun stroke along his bare arm, so deeply tanned that the crisp hairs looked like tiny spears of gold. Her fingernails dug into the palm of her hand, for she felt a sensual urge to run her palm along his forearm and feel the delicious stab of those little golden hairs. Her legs trembled and she stood there hollow and expectant, as if at any moment his hard arm would curve itself around her and she would be drawn against the hard bone and sinew of him in her thin dress.

It was like a slap across the face when he said in the polite voice of the host, 'I always dine at eight-thirty, Miss Lakeside, and as I have an Indonesian cook I hope you won't mind that *rijstaffel* is usually served. To your English palate our food might seem a little spicy at first, but it grows on you, unless of course you have any dietary problems and would, perhaps, prefer to cook for yourself. That could be arranged, *mevrouw*. I do realise that foreign fare can be unsettling to someone like yourself.'

Someone getting on in years, with the staid and unexciting habits of the spinster to whom rice on the table meant milky pudding with a baked skin on top!

'Oh, I'm not finicky when it comes to food, *mynheer*.' Her cheeks burned and she managed to keep her voice steady even if she still felt shaken up ... heaven help her, she was going to have to keep a grip on her feelings or he'd sense something and think himself the target for the uninvited longings of a repressed virgin! Heaven forbid, she thought wryly, that a virgin of any age should show signs of having normal feelings; they were reserved for the initiated wives, and spinsters had to act as if they belonged to a breed who were stuffed with straw and had vinegar in their veins. Some people even seemed to believe it, and were actually appalled by the idea of a spinster aunt having a real body under her pin-striped blouse.

She wondered what Paul van Setan's reaction would have been had she suddenly said to him: 'Do you remember Sister Whitney in Ward Nine, and all that nine-days' wonder when she ran off with that neighbour of her mother's? It was a joke and then a shock that she wasn't a tartar after all, but someone who had longed to be loved as much as those pretty nurses in their sheer black stockings.'

Had he ever bent his ear to any of the hospital gossip, she wondered, as she was beckoned ahead of him into the house she was going to share with him ... a gauche spinster, as he believed her to be, with whom it was quite safe to live in close proximity.

Wind-chimes on bamboo strings tinkled above her head as she walked into the long shady lounge, where in the high ceiling the wings of large fans were rotating. She saw teakwood cabinets with a trim of shell, low tables of ebony wood, cane-braided long chairs with brilliant cushions, and walls hung with rain masks and strange carvings, and also one or two oriental swords with curving, lethal-looking blades.

'Please to take a chair, Miss Lakeside.' As he spoke Paul bent to a table on which stood a silver bell. He found it with his fingers and rang it. 'The houseboy will bring tea in a very few moments. What do you think of my living-room?'

'Very nice, *mynheer*, cheerful and comfortable.'

'And not quite what you expected, eh, of a bachelor living in the wilds—a blind

bachelor. I must make it explicit, *mevrouw*, that no one here avoids the fact that I am this way. No one gets embarrassed if they happen to speak of something that I can't see and share with them in the obvious sense.' He walked to a Dutch marquetry cabinet, making his way with an unhesitating firmness, and she watched as he ran his hand over the inlaid wood. 'This is from Holland and it belonged to my grandmother. I know there are tulips inlaid in satinwood and if you watch me you will see my fingers trace those tulips. It's amazing, Miss Lakeside, how potent touch becomes to a blind person; my fingertips can feel the subtle variation in the silks of the woods, just as I know each intricate pattern on the hilt of this knife.'

As he spoke he toyed with a *samurai* dagger which had lain on the cabinet, and his strong, memorable hands wandered over the lovely but lethal weapon. 'This was here in the house when I came to stay, and then it was the blade I was interested in, sharp and unerring, putting out the pulse of my heart as the light had been put out of my eyes—ah, you caught your breath just then. Does it shock you that I speak of such a thing?'

'Yes—no.' She was staring in horrified fascination at the dagger. 'I—I think I can understand how awful it must be to be shut off from the light, but I don't think you'd end it all—in that way.'

'Why not?' He said it almost harshly.

'You aren't that sort of man, *mynheer*. You spent your life saving lives, so you wouldn't wantonly waste your own. You have learned to live with your affliction.'

'You think so?'

'Of course. One can hardly tell by looking at you— your eyes aren't marked.'

'Why should they be marked, Miss Lakeside?' His voice had sunk down to almost a menacing note and his jaw was so hard it might have been made of iron.

'Y-you had an accident, didn't you, *mynheer*?' Her heart was racing and her nerves were all on edge again. 'I remember reading about it in the newspaper, but I—I don't know all the details.'

'Then allow me to supply them.' Still toying with the *samurai* weapon, he began to come towards her across the room having judged the position from her voice, until with unerring precision he stood above the chair where she sat.

'Always after the performance of an operation I used to wash the fatigue from my eyes with a mild boric acid solution, and one afternoon a fool of a girl gave me the wrong stuff and I tipped it into my eyes ... I won't go into those details, for your stomach might be turned, but if I could have got hold of that little fool I'd have choked the life out of her. Instead I was flat on my back for some time, for I had to go under the knife so my eyes would at least look like eyes again even if they could no longer function. My work was very important and I had plans that can never be realised ... oh yes, I have come to terms with the darkness of my sight, but not quite with another kind of darkness. Does the word vengeance appal you, Miss Lakeside?'

Merlin gazed up at him and she felt as if the skin of her face had been tightened over her bones. Terror gripped her. Somehow he knew ... he had to know, or he wouldn't be

talking like this to someone he considered a stranger. The knife gleamed in his fingers and she felt as if the tip of the blade had been put against her throat... and she also knew that if he put it there she wouldn't struggle as it sank into her flesh.

'Yes, I can feel it, that you are appalled,' he said, and he seemed to be looking right at her, and each word seemed meant for her alone. 'I need to have you know the kind of man I am, *mevrouw*, for we'll be working together for some months. I shan't always be kind or patient, and I want it understood between us now that you won't howl if I snap at you. I can't abide the tears of a woman.'

They told me that criminal fool of a nurse broke down and cried uncontrollably at the inquiry, but tears can't wash away the acid of hate, and you might as well know, Miss Lakeside, that you'll be working for a man whose heart is black with it ... black as his vision. That was why I needed a sensible woman out here, someone capable of putting up with an embittered man. Are you capable of that?'

For seconds on end Merlin was incapable of replying to him. He had lifted her to a peak of terror, and now he dropped her into a pit of relief. She struggled there, to find a voice that wouldn't shake all over the place and make him wonder why a stranger should be so frightened.

It was at that crucial moment that the houseboy entered with the tea trolley, wheeling it straight to the table beside Merlin's chair, as if he understood without being instructed that she would take charge of the tea pouring.

'Ramai, this is the *Mevrouw Lakeside* who will be residing here with us. She has come from England and will feel strange among us for a while, so do all you can to make her feel at home.'

Ja, mynheer.' The boy stared at Merlin, running his quick dark eyes all over her, as if he was wondering why on earth the *tuan besar* should address her like that and not as *jonkvrouw*, the young miss that she undoubtedly looked as she sat there in the cane chair in her simple white dress, unringed hands clenching the arms of the chair. Panic spiralled again in Merlin as she caught that look of the houseboy's, and then she saw him shrug his shoulders in the white tunic, as if he had already learned that European men and women had funny ways with each other and were not direct like island people when it came to the relationship of the sexes.

'Tea and cakes for the *mevrouw*, as ordered, *tuan*.' He smiled up at the big Dutchman as if he could be seen, and Merlin noticed that it was a smile of unquestioning respect. 'Will that be all, *tuan*?''

'For the moment, Ramai. The *mevrouw's* suitcases have been taken to the Jade Room?'

Ja, and I will unpack them if the—the *mevrouw* so wishes and lets me have the keys.'

'No, that's kind of you,' Merlin said hastily, 'but I prefer to do my own unpacking.'

'As the *mevrouw* instructs.' The boy looked directly at her and this time his smile was faintly impudent. Then he left the room, and biting at her lip Merlin proceeded to pour

the tea. How long, she wondered, would it be before Paul discovered that he was being deceived and that the object of his 'black hatred' was installed in this house and acting the part of his middle-aged secretary?

Her wrist shook and she had to force herself to some sort of control. 'Do you take sugar, *mynheer*?'

'One cube and a slice of lemon,' he replied, and he sat down in a long chair facing her, and as she picked up the little sugar tongs to place the cube in his cup Merlin was so unbearably conscious of his large frame that she did what she had tried so hard not to do, dropped the tongs so they clattered on the table. Good job it hadn't been his cup of tea, she thought, as she retrieved the tongs.

'Why is your hand shaking?' he drawled. 'What are you so nervous about, Miss Lakeside?'

'I—I'm probably feeling a little fatigued, and you have to remember, Mynheer van Setan, that I have never been this far from home before. I'm feeling strange, that's all.'

He took his cup with a murmur of thanks. 'You live alone in England, eh?'

'Yes.' She added cream to her own cup of tea and had a brief vision of that Tottenham bedsitter where she had spent so much of her life since her dismissal from the hospital, where she had lived in the adjoining nursing quarters. She could have gone North to stay with her mother and stepfather, but there would have been too many questions to answer, and all she had wanted was to be on her own, and the bedsitter had been a kind of cell each evening when she returned from her job, and there for weeks and months she had served a kind of sentence, blaming herself as much as that other nurse for not noticing that the fluid in the eye-cup had a different odour ... but Paul had performed a sort of miracle on that woman's face and she had been so carried away by the wonder of his skill, and by him, that all she had wanted was to help to soothe his poor tired eyes as quickly as possible.

'Yes,' she said again. 'I lived alone, for as I wrote and told you, *mynheer*, I'm a spinster and I have only the responsibility of earning a living. I liked the idea of working on a island for a few months.'

'The idea struck you as romantic?' He lounged there drinking his tea, and Merlin was sure she detected a twist of mockery on his lips, as if it amused him that a single woman, obviously lonely because men found her unexciting, should harbour the ridiculous notion that a remote island and a blind man could provide any romance for her.

'I'm not a person who chases rainbows, *mynheer*, but I did like the idea of an island far away from the turmoil and dissatisfaction of modern life. Islands remain untouched, don't they?'

'Not by natural forces such as hurricanes—I hope you are eating the cakes? My cook will be affronted if you send them back untouched.'

'Won't you have one, *mynheer*?'

'I would rather smoke a cigar, if you are not averse to the strong Dutch sort?'

'Oh, please smoke!' And with a fork poised above a slice of coconut cake Merlin watched the unfumbling way he sought a slim, very dark cigar from a carved box and

pressed to the end of it a lighter with the flame inside the cylinder, holding it in position until smoke came from his indrawn nostrils. She marvelled at his adroitness, but then he had always had such certain hands, so confident and dexterous, and somehow his blindness had increased his sense of touch. With her gaze full upon him it seemed incredible that he couldn't actually see the cigar in his fingers, or watch the smoke make blue shapes in the air.

'Go on with your cake,' he said. 'You don't have to watch me as if I'm going to set fire to myself ... yes. I know you are sitting there like a mother all tensed to spring to the rescue of an errant infant, but I'm really quite capable, *mevrouw*.'

'You're remarkable,' she agreed. 'I never knew that someone sightless could be so—so self-reliant.'

'Practice, and the very definite urge not to be a burden on the sighted. Like the deaf, my sort can be a pain in the neck.'

'Oh no!' She couldn't suppress the note of pain in her voice, and again she saw his lips take that mordant twist.

'But yes!' The strong smoke clouded about his face. 'Those who can see take a great deal for granted, but there do happen to be compensations for the blinded.'

The imagination can run riot at times and I can place over the blank faces any sort of mask that takes my fancy. Shall I describe your mask and shall we see how closely it fits?'

'No, I don't think I want that.'

'I'm your employer and you are under my orders, so don't forget it.' He flicked ash and it fell in a star to the teakwood floor. 'You have a rather reserved face, I think, and you wear very little make-up and a very discreet perfume, which probably means that you don't regard yourself as exciting to men.'

'I—I'm very ordinary, *mynheer*.' And she was also unnerved by his uncannily perceptive image of her, almost as if he knew in advance the person he was describing.

'But you aren't ordinary, Miss Lakeside. Such a woman wouldn't travel halfway across the world in order to work—she might do so in order to marry, but not to carry on the rather tedious task of taking shorthand notes and pounding a typewriter. You are fairly tall for a woman—I can judge so from your voice when you are standing near me—and you have a very slim figure.'

'But how can you tell that?' she exclaimed.

'From the shape of your hand, which is slender, with the tapering fingers of the person who does not put on undue weight. Your colouring remains a mystery, but let me take a guess—your eyes are blue?'

'No.' She gave a brief, pained smile. 'They're brown.'

'Strange, one usually associates shy people with blue eyes. I wonder why?'

'Because the sea is blue and secretive.'

'Are you secretive, Miss Lakeside—and please let me add at this juncture that you have an unusually attractive surname. What does the M of your first name stand for? Not Margery, I hope, which reminds me of a certain grocery product that is scraped on the sandwiches in hospital canteens.'

'I'm afraid it's a little pretentious for someone like me,' she said. 'You'll probably smile.'

'It's always good to smile, but do you consider yourself so unpretentious? The majority of women are quite sure of their *femme fatale*.'

'You sound cynical about women, *mynheer*.'

'Perhaps I have reason to be.' As he spoke he raised a hand to the side of his eyes and she saw the iron take its grip on his facial muscles. 'Sometimes a man comes up against a woman who sets such store by her own witchery that she becomes capable of the most diabolic behaviour if her runes and charms don't have an effect on him. I am blind because I was immune to such a witch.'

'Oh no!' He couldn't see that Merlin's eyes had filled with horror—sheer horror that he should believe such a thing. She wanted to protest that it wasn't true, but to declare herself innocent of that diablerie would reveal her identity and she could see from his face that he'd be quite merciless in dealing with her. The blinding pain and terror had clawed too deeply into his mind to ever make it possible that he would forgive the woman he thought of as a kind of Delilah, robbing him of his precious sight and his ability to heal people. Like Samson, the tall pillars of his temple had been brought down at his feet and the strength of his talents had been blasted.

It was awful and Merlin came very close to throwing herself at his knees, within reach of those strong hands, which could very easily snap her neck. 'Believe me ... believe me,' she wanted to cry out. 'I never wanted to hurt a hair of your head ... I'd give you my eyes if they'd be of any use!'

'The truth is often grim,' he said, sensing that he had shocked her. 'So provide me with the lighter side of the Janus mask that fits all of us—make me smile!'

'I was christened Merlin, after the bird and not the wizard.' The effort to speak lightly brought a fine perspiration out on her upper lip and she reached for the teapot. 'Can I pour you another cup of tea?'

'Please.' He reached for his cup at the same time as she did and their fingers collided; abruptly he gripped her hand. 'You feel cold, Miss Lakeside, called Merlin after a falcon and not a seer. You aren't accustomed to an employer who talks as I do, of witchcraft and devils, eh? Blind men become introspective and life takes on different images for them—you will get used to me, and if you don't there is always Lon to fly you off in the helicopter. Anyway, have another cup of tea and then go up and unpack your belongings. Once you have made the room look more like home, then you'll begin to relax.'

His hard, warm fingers relaxed from hers and she felt a sense of deprivation as he lounged away from her in his long chair, lifting his cigar to his lips, his sightless eyes looking beyond her, to him the drab, cold spinster with the name of a swift-winged bird ... a falcon flung into the vivid blue skies of a faraway island.

As Merlin handed Paul his tea, she lived again that moment when she had handed him the eye-cup. A shudder ripped through her. Every hour and every day spent with him would be a heavenly hell, for the old worship of the hero had turned to something else and

she knew she loved the man with every fibre of her body.

Even yet she felt his touch and unbeknown to him she pressed to her cheek the hand he had held ... he had said that she was cold; he hadn't any suspicion that a flame was burning at the core of her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

LONG sea breakers combed the sleek silvery beach, shifting pebbles and small shells and the tiny marine creatures in the rock pools. The spume made a rainbow as the sun caught the fine mist.

Merlin stood gazing upwards as a boy climbed the incline of a coconut palm, his calloused feet gripping the ridges of the tall trunk. There among the long plummy leaves he hacked with a knife at a large green nut.

The vibrant sun played over the scene and the water beyond was lizard-green shot with blue. Clumps of lacy coral lay here and there on the sand, and Merlin shifted her bare feet in the gritty warmth and sank her teeth into a slice of pineapple. She felt like a child playing truant, and for a while she could surrender to the magic of the island, the glorious colouring and primitive spell of it all. She wore narrow knee-pants and a thin shirt, and her hair was set free to her shoulders and the sun had found the tortoiseshell shadings of honey and amber.

Palm leaves rattled and a coconut thudded to the beach. A few moments later Ramai had followed and stood grinning at her. 'For breakfast, *nonya*. The meat of the young nut can be eaten like a boiled egg and the *tuan* very fond of it. You think you like?'

'Why not?' Her own smile was tentative, for this house-boy could cause her destruction if he ever let slip in front of the *tuan* that she wasn't the staid *mevrouw* who Paul imagined was working for him.

'We say that when the nut is green the flavour is sweet —like a woman.'

'Really?'

The boy flicked a look at her pants and shirt and his gaze dwelt upon her long hair. 'Why you pretend to be old, *nonya*?' It was out, said at last, what always lay in Ramai's eyes when he served her at table with Paul, or brought cool drinks to the den where they worked, she at the lovely Chinese desk with its many lacquered drawers, and Paul pacing the Chinese carpet that spread from wall to wall of the room.

'Not old, Ramai,' she corrected him, 'but more the style of person the *tuan* desired as a secretary. It does no harm and I need to work for my pay as you do. If he finds out I'm younger than he believes, then he'll fire me.'

'Set fire to you, *nonya*?' Ramai looked horrified.

She smiled and swiped a fly from her nose. 'That's another way of saying he'll send me away in disgrace, and then I shall be out of work and will have to find a job that won't be as nice as this one.'

'Why should the *tuan* want a motherly woman when he can have a young one?'

I think, *nonya*, that he be much pleased.' Ramai's smile became impudent.

'Tuan Paul still a man even if he cannot see, big man that make your heart beat fast.'

'That will be enough, Ramai!' She spoke sharply. 'You mustn't say things that could cause mischief.'

'There be much mischief he learn for himself you make out to be motherly.'

'He won't find out unless you go carrying tales to him— do you want to get me into trouble?'

'No, *nonya*.' The boy tossed a coconut, weighing it in the palm of his hand.

'The house nice since you come, with flowers in the pots and the music you play on the big piano, and Tuan Paul not at his prowls so much. He go much prowling before, sometimes swim at night when the big sharks are out there.' He gestured at the sea, which at this moment looked too impossibly green-blue and shimmering to harbour the menace of those grinning jaws filled with grinding teeth that could saw off a limb in just a few seconds. Merlin gave a shiver as she pictured Paul swimming blindly in the dark ocean, aware of the menace and yet undeterred by it, almost as if he didn't care if Nemesis came in the blunt-nosed shape of a killer shark, dragging him down where the blackness was complete.

'Then you'll keep my secret, Ramai? You'll let Tuan Paul go on believing what it does no harm for him to believe?'

'We say to destroy an illusion is to tear the wings from a butterfly.' Ramai gave her a wink of conspiracy. 'Good for *tuan* to have woman in his house, even if he thinks her skinny, grey-haired woman instead of nice-skinned girl with hair like turtle-shell. White people most peculiar in such matters. Island man soon touch and find out the truth.'

'You're a young devil, aren't you?' Merlin blushed furiously, and yet felt curiously elated. No one had ever said such saucily nice things to her, especially about her hair, which during working hours was woven into a nape-knot, its mottling of amber and honey less noticeable than right now.

'*Nonya* like me all the same.' His teeth gleamed white against his brown skin.

'Now I go take nuts to the house for *tuan's makan pagi*. You coming?'

'In a little while.' She glanced at her wristwatch. 'I just want to stand here and get a breath of sea air before the sun gets too warm.'

The boy sauntered off, leaving Merlin alone on the shore, her bare white feet splashed by the breakers as they swirled to the sands and then smoothly withdrew, like great bolts of silvery jade silk. What a place! And how sad that Paul couldn't see the vivid colours for himself. She sighed, but was glad that she and Ramai had come to an understanding, for she couldn't endure the thought of being dismissed from the island, never to see Paul again, working with him in the den, listening to that deep, faintly accented voice as he dictated the notes that she later typed, reading them back to him for corrections to the manuscript. It was all she had of him and she clung to it like a starfish to a rock, her starved heart expanded like a flower in the sun, her body awake and aware even if there could be no physical fulfilment in being with him.

She bent to pick up a piece of deep pink coral, playing her fingers over the lace, closing her eyes and trying to imagine what it was like to depend on touch and smell and sound. The sound of her voice could bring his eyes to her face, but beyond that her features were a blank which he had to mask with his imagination.

As he thought of her as a lonely, unattached spinster, then he probably had a mental image of a plain, unexciting face, with grey hair drawn back from a lined brow. Her safety

lay in that image he had of her, yet she was only human and couldn't suppress a wistful smile as she thought of what Ramai had said about her skin and hair, and that an island man would soon have learned the truth by touching her.

Touched by Paul, those strong and sensitive hands fondling her skin and finding her soft to his fingers. She gave a tiny groan and felt the sweet ache of longing in her very bones. Love was as tormenting as it could be joyful. For her it held as much risk as it held rapture during those evenings alone with Paul, her fingers on the piano keys playing those songs remembered from the music sheets her mother had hoarded from the war years, while that figure in tropic whites smoked a cigar by the veranda windows, the night moths drifting in, attracted by the lamp on the piano.

Stolen days and nights, a pretender in his house, and yet someone he was coming to depend on. He didn't say, but she sensed it. And he liked those old sentimental songs and didn't pretend that he wanted Chopin music, or the melancholy of Beethoven. Merlin was glad about that, for she had been taught how to play by her mother and the classics weren't in her repertoire.

'You have a joyous touch,' he had said to her the other evening, 'on the piano keys.'

'Thank you,' she had replied, and longed to transfer that touch to his face, his shoulders, a longing to embrace him that was beyond telling.

It had to be enough, the miracle of being here on this island with him, of getting accustomed to the house where everything, every large to middling object had felt his touch. Sitting down to high table with him, eating the steaming white rice served in porcelain bowls, with subtle wine in jade-green cups. Gasping from the hot curry and hearing him laugh as he caught the sound, and when he laughed it mended some of the agony which had seemed so overwhelming. Love, how it could grip her by the throat, like the morning when he came to the den with a baby turtle in the palm of his hand. 'Killing turtles is forbidden on this island,' he had told her. 'See, it has a tiny shell already.'

See ... only he couldn't see, not the hurt or the happiness on her face as she stood and stroked a finger across that tiny shell as the small primal creature walked on his palm.

What, she wondered, did she do with the love as it built up inside her and there seemed no way to release it except by just being here ... being where Paul was and hoping with each new day that he wouldn't find out, wouldn't suddenly realise that she was the person he had just cause to hate.

What did she do with the hate if she suddenly found herself at the mercy of it, deadly in the blind eyes, raw and torturing in his voice, so cruel in the hands that had been so gentle with the baby turtle!

Merlin stood there silently and still and watched the light boats, with a great wing of coloured sail, going off to fish with the emblem of the snake-king painted on the prow; Naga who sat upon a throne of rubies. Island of superstition and subtle charm, the women with their babies slung in the coloured *slendeng* on a graceful shoulder. The women did most of the cultivating of the yams, rice and pineapple, pretty creatures with golden-brown skin and birdwing eyebrows above dark slanting eyes which held an allure Paul must have felt ... had

he been able to see them. He had promised her that the next time the villagers held a dance at the temple he would take her to watch the bell dancers, and the men who wore formidable masks to perform in mime some of the old Indonesian legends.

How long, she asked herself, could the dream last before reality had to break the spell and drag her awake? Being here on Pulau-Indah was like a dream, but she knew how fragile was her hold on the dream and the awakening would be terrifying, not to be endured even in her thoughts. Paul, knowing her at last behind the compliant, agreeable, spinsterish mask his imagination had placed over her face ... bitterly angered by the deception ... the sleeping tiger aroused and snarling.

She turned quickly and hastened towards the rock steps, running from her thoughts in her bare feet, her raffia sandals forgotten at the foot of a palm tree.

She crossed the bridge across the tea valley almost unaware and walked beneath the embracing curves of the banyan trees, brushed by sprays of wild orchids, lady-finger bananas within reach of her fingers.

Paul was standing on the veranda between the palm supports, clad in cream trousers and a brown silk shirt. He seemed unaware of her until she actually wished him good morning. He turned at the sound of her voice and as always his eyes seemed to find her face and she felt the stab of apprehension, the guilty fear that she was as visual to him as he was to her. He was always closely shaven by the other houseboy, who acted as a sort of valet to him, and his thick white-gold hair was scrupulously combed back from the powerful forehead. ^ was, especially this morning, hard to believe that he wasn't blind. In no way had he let himself go physically; his body was even harder and stronger than it had been in England, and the skin was so tanned by the island sun that his hair shone like a metallic helmet above those firmly controlled features.

A faint breeze tinkled the wind-chimes. 'I didn't hear you,' he said, frowning.

'I'm barefooted.'

'What foolishness! Have you been down to the beach like that?'

'I had a pair of sandals, but I mislaid them.'

'You could collect jigger worms in your toes, or the septic spines of a sea-urchin. I thought you had more sense than to go walking about on the sands like a foolish girl!'

Her hands gripped the veranda rail at those words. 'The sands are so white and warm, and the island people go about with bare feet.'

'Their feet are hardened to the place, but even they get jigger worms under the skin and the things hurt when they're extracted. Lon or one of the boys would have to extract the things if you picked them up, for you do realise that my operating days are over?' His hands were holding a mandarin orange and suddenly his fingers tightened and the fruit was squashed and oozing juice over his skin. 'Damnation!' He flung the fruit across the veranda rail in the direction of the trees. 'Each day I tell myself that I won't let it eat into my brain like a worm, but today, as you see, the worm bit.'

Merlin watched him as he dragged a handkerchief from his pocket and dried his hands ... how strong those hands ... they could break a woman's neck if he really let go and

lost control of himself.

'I think there's a wind getting up.' He raised his voice to a shout. 'Ramai, will you come here this instant!'

The boy evidently thought the *tuan* was impatient for his breakfast, for he arrived with a laden tray and apologies that Paul waved aside. 'Do I hear and smell a big wind?' he demanded.

'The palm fronds are restless, *tuan*.' Ramai put down the tray and glanced towards the left of the house, where the trees thickened and the jungle began.

'We will know in an hour or so, if the devil starts drumming in the forest.'

'Typhoon?' Paul asked, his face raised as if he were testing the wind against his skin.

'Could be, *tuan*, this time of year.'

'Damnation.' Paul glanced about him in a sudden lost way. 'This is when I start feeling like a useless log—still, it might only be the threat of a storm, but go find Lon and tell him to get in radio contact with the mainland. We had better be prepared for the worst.'

'*Ja, tuan*.' The boy nodded, as if Paul could see him. 'Your *makan pagi* on the table. *Mevrouw* will pour coffee, eh?'

'*Ja*, she will see to things. Scatter and find Lon, and if the news is bad, then get down to the village and warn your people. They know what to do better than I, but it will help if we get confirmation by radio in advance.'

The boy darted down the veranda steps and loped off in search of Lon, who for the past weeks had been assisting with the supervision of the tea valley, Paul's cousin not being due back for a fortnight. Merlin dreaded his return ... unlike Lon he wasn't an Indonesian who rather liked intrigue; nor was he Ramai, a boy who could be talked into playing a game of makebelieve. Paul's cousin was Dutch like himself and he'd want to know all about her, or as much as she liked to tell him, and if anyone was going to let out to Paul that she was a girl in her twenties and not a woman in her forties, then the cousin was the most likely candidate.

'Come, let us have breakfast,' Paul said, and he gestured in the general direction of the table. 'I hope we haven't unnerved you with our talk about a typhoon? You mustn't worry. This house is built to withstand a strong blow and the houseboys will bring back their families here, or take them down to the valley.'

'I should think it would be safer, *mynheer*.' She lifted the coffee pot and poured for both of them, adding sugar to his cup and just a dash of thick cream.

She placed the cup exactly where he could reach it without knocking it over, and felt an inward tightening of her nerves as she heard for herself the restless fluttering of the palm and casuarina leaves. She had learned since coming here that those trees were invariably planted in pairs as they represented the male and female principle, the palm towering and strong, the casuarina graceful and somehow compliant in its aspect.

'*Ja*, the valley is safe, *mevrouw*, if this should be only a big wind, but if the sea should throw a tidal wave then it isn't so good. We stay here at the house. Do you mind?'

'I do whatever you think is best, *mynheer*.' She served him with the delicious

coconut jelly, after which there were fried oysters and rice balls. 'It will be a new experience for me to see a typhoon.'

'It is more to the point to say that you will hear it, *mevrouw*. At its height the big wind sounds like an express train rushing through a tunnel, a long, long tunnel that makes the noise seem endless. Are you feeling afraid? It would be perfectly natural.'

'I'm nervous,' she admitted, 'but not terrified.' It was somehow impossible to feel as frightened of the elements as she felt of Paul himself if he should suddenly change towards her, revealing the black hatred that gnawed at his heart and would go on gnawing until he could assuage it.

'Now you know, *mevrouw*, why I wished to have a sensible woman here and not a romantic girl. Islands are not always idyllic places, such as they are made out to be in the travel brochures, and I really don't fancy a frightened young thing on my hands if we are in for a typhoon and the winds starts ripping trees out of the ground and causing quite a bit of hell to break loose.' He pronged oyster on to a fork and gave his twist of a smile. 'I'm not exactly equipped to play knight errant, and that is what romantic girls expect, chivalry and the firm arm of protection.'

You are a woman past all that, eh?

'Of course,' said Merlin, and gave him a petrified look. It was all too tragically easy to fool a blind man, to assume the serene manner of an older woman, and a more deliberate way of walking. Of having flowers about the house, and making sure the boys kept the rooms free of dust—something they had not been too scrupulous about before her arrival. Also those old songs she played for him helped a great deal to establish her as a woman long out of touch with the modern trends in popular music. She had, to put it crudely, pulled the wool over his eyes, but when his cousin returned from Holland ... oh God, she didn't want to think about that, but if she were exposed then she could only pray that he would accept the explanation that she had wanted the job so much that she hadn't thought it would matter if she let him believe that she was in her sensible forties. They had now been working together for several weeks and it would delay work on the book if he angrily dismissed her and sought another secretary.

She didn't want to leave him ... that was at the heart and root of everything.

Life would have no meaning at all if she couldn't see him each day, hear his voice and do his bidding. Stolen fruit, both bitter and sweet, and which he'd choke her with if he ever learned the real truth of her identity.

'You have gone very quiet, *mevrouw*, and the foliage of the trees is rattling all the harder. Or is it your knees knocking?'

She smiled. 'I'm not going to pretend that I haven't got the jitters, *mynheer*, but this is a soundly built house and I'm ready to face what the fates have in store for me.'

'Fatalistic, eh? You believe, do you, that is what is written on your scroll will assuredly come to pass? It's a view I find hard to swallow.'

'Why is that, *mynheer*?'

'I don't happen to find it terribly amusing that it was written I should come to *this*,

cut off from my life's work, unable to function at what I did best, and all because of some damned little nurse who thought I should be taught a lesson for not taking sufficient notice of her.'

'Oh, do you really believe that?' Merlin's face was a picture of pain. 'I'm sure it must have been an accident—no one—no woman would be that cruel!'

'You weren't there!' he said curtly. 'How would you know? You are a woman who has kept apart from the complexity of passions that certain other people indulge in. I once had the task of trying to restore a face at which a woman had flung a kerosene lamp ... impossible to imagine, is it not, and yet it happened.'

Passion can be a force motivated by the devil himself ... I wanted to destroy that woman as she destroyed my eyes, and that was one of the reasons why I came halfway across the world to live ... to try and forget. It isn't easy. I am not Saint Paul.'

He rose to his feet as he spoke and went to the veranda rail, where he stood in a listening attitude, his brows drawn together as he took out his cheroots and lit one, taking in a deep lungful of the smoke and expelling it through taut nostrils.

'Ramai should be back soon,' he said. 'I'm sorry if certain facts of life strike you as harsh, *mevrouw*, but you haven't had a lot to do with men, have you? I'm not belittling you for that, but I actually think it praiseworthy that a woman should be serene and not a hell-cat who lives only to torment other people.'

There is a great deal of serenity in you, but you are probably unaware of the fact. There is modesty in you as well.'

'I'm no saint myself, *mynheer*!' Merlin flushed, half with pleasure at what he said, half with dismay. She had suspected that he was forming an image of her that his Dutch cousin could blast into fragments with a few well chosen words, and quickly she went over to him and dared to touch his forearm below the short sleeve of his shirt, lightly, tentatively, with pleading.

'*Mynheer*, what if your cousin doesn't like me? What will you do if he paints a different picture of me from the one you have in mind? I—I like my job here—I wouldn't like to be sent away—'

'My dear woman,' he was gazing downwards to where her hand rested on his skin, 'do you imagine that Hendrik dictates to me? I have formed my conclusions about you and he can't alter them. You are a good secretary and we get along, eh?'

'Oh yes.'

'Then why should Hendrik object to you? You do your work to my satisfaction, and keep me company in the evenings.'

'Your cousin will wish to do that when he returns.'

'Hardly.' Paul gave a cynical smile and tipped ash from his cheroot with a long forefinger. 'He has what is called an arrangement with a woman from the village—it often happens when men work away from their homeland, and loneliness can break the spirit of the hardest man, and Hendrik isn't hard. He's addicted to the tropics and cannot work elsewhere, and it is none of my business if he wishes to alleviate his loneliness and lighten his

leisure with an attractive island girl, so long as her parents are satisfied that he treats her well. Are you shocked, *mevrouw*?’

‘No, I’m not narrow-minded, *mynheer*.’ Merlin, to put it mildly, was relieved to hear that Hendrik van Setan wasn’t the starchy sort whose back would be stiff as a board to match his principles. After all, she wasn’t deceiving Paul in a way that could hurt him and she might manage to persuade Hendrik to let the deception go on. She crossed her fingers and hoped so.

‘Are you wondering why I haven’t succumbed to the charms of a dusky island girl?’ Paul murmured, and that disconcerting blind gaze was full upon her face as if he could read her features and see her reaction to his question.

‘You strike me as a very strong-willed man,’ she replied. ‘I don’t think you’d ever give in to your own desires unless they had real meaning for you.’

‘Such as being motivated by love? Is that what you mean?’

‘Yes.’ She said it firmly, her conviction rooted in the marvellous surgeon he had been, a kind of decisive tenderness in the way he had used his skilful hands. ‘I don’t think you’ve ever had much time for empty experiences and much prefer those that enrich you.’

‘That might have been true when I had the satisfaction and enrichment of my work, *mevrouw*. Now, like a house without windows, I dominate an empty landscape and will gradually fall into ruin—then, believe me, I shall turn to the arms of consolation. Why not? I imagine the island girls are sweet-tempered and sweet to the touch. That’s all a man like me should want or need. A pliable affection from someone who will slip quietly away when the tiger feels like howling to the moon he can’t see.’

‘Do tigers howl?’ she asked, trying to speak lightly and finding it hard to manage.

‘If the thorn’s in deep enough,’ he rejoined, ‘and you’ve been long enough on the island to have heard the name the islanders have given me, *harimau* which means tiger.’

‘*Sang harimau*,’ she corrected him. ‘King tiger.’

His smile was brief, a trifle caustic. ‘It has something to do with a legend of theirs, that each one of us has been at some time a member of the animal kingdom and that when we take human shape certain of our former characteristics are retained. Soon after I came to Pulau-Indah I took to going into the forest at night, where I had an uncanny knack of finding my way, obviously due to increased facility to hear and sense the presence of other night creatures.

Real tigers roam there, you know, and at night they’re prowling for food.

The islanders first decided that I was crazy, and then very gradually they began to hint that I had an affinity with the big tawny cats and that was why I was unafraid to go where they were. The truth was I didn’t much care if one night they took me for their supper—you catch your breath with extreme sharpness, *mevrouw*, but a woman like you, you support the truth and dislike dishonesty, don’t you?’

Merlin put a hand to her throat and felt for a moment slightly choked by her own dishonesty. Feeling the withdrawal of her touch from his arm, he glanced downwards and she saw his eyebrows pull together. ‘Have I struck a wrong chord?’ he asked. ‘Have you some

small guilty secret, Miss Lakeside, locked up in your heart?’

‘Haven’t we all got a few bones in the cupboard of our conscience, *mynheer*!’

‘I’m an old maid, but not necessarily a devout nun.’

‘Intriguing,’ he murmured. ‘The secrets of Ruth are always more subtle than the secrets of Jezebel. It has to do with a man, of course?’

‘That—that is always the assumption.’ she said uneasily.

‘The most logical one, unless you once robbed a piggy bank.’ Then to Merlin’s disquiet, she saw him reaching out a hand in her direction, as if sudden curiosity made him want to actually touch the object of his aroused interest. She drew away, carefully, back against the veranda rail, all too conscious that she had on a thin shirt and that although her figure was slim she had a youthful firmness and suppleness that his sensitive fingers would be aware of at once.

Lon had warned her of this. That blind men could tell so much from the voice, and then came the day when they wanted to extend their research. It was perfectly natural and under normal circumstances she would have offered her face for a braille reading, though it would have touched the near peaks of exquisite agony to have let him touch her body.

‘I can hear you moving away from me,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Are you scared of being touched? I mean it quite impersonally. You mustn’t imagine that I want to take a liberty.’

‘I don’t imagine that.’ Merlin shrank into stillness, like a prudish spinster grown so out of touch with physical contact that it now took on a sinister aspect.

It was better to act like that than to face the real truth, that she dreaded to be found out and yet longed to be discovered as a girl of twenty-one who could give him the sweet consolation he must hunger for in the dark depth of his days and nights. She wanted that strong brown arm to curve around her and drag her hard and fast to that tanned and sinewy body, whose skin would warmly sear her own, whose muscles would make her feel deliriously weak, whose desires would come vibrantly alive to the young female feel of her. How she longed for that ... a rage of heaven even if afterwards she had to face the hell of his anger.

He was blind, but his mind was keenly, alertly alive, and he’d guess who she was ... he’d find out, and the pleasure wouldn’t be worth the pain of his hatred.

‘You are scared out of your wits,’ he said softly. His nostrils tensed, as if he had actually caught the scent of her fear. ‘My dear woman, I haven’t been so long without a woman that I shall go berserk and ravish you the instant I get my hands on your body. I merely wished to braille you—I thought we had got to know one another well enough for that.’

It was an awful dilemma, for Merlin didn’t dare to let his hands have contact with her face or her figure; those fingers of his had been highly sensitive and aware of skin textures and bone construction before his blindness, and if he touched her now he would realise instantly that she was not what she claimed to be

... a middle-aged woman.

Then, with a shrug and a mordant little twist of his lip, he said: ‘What made you stay

single—did you never wish to marry?’

So that was what he assumed, that she was a frigid prude who shrank from physical contact with a man! Well, it couldn’t be helped if he took her for that sort, but there was something very mocking in the way he thrust both hands into the pockets of his trousers, letting her know that she was safe from their marauding ... for now.

‘I—I imagine most women like to be married,’ she replied, a burning in her cheeks.

‘So you never met the right man, eh?’

She gazed into his sightless eyes and poignant on her mouth, like a frozen kiss, was the answer she could never put into words. ‘I’m not a woman that men seem to notice.’

‘It is said in this part of the world that for every man there is a soul in the shape of a woman, that until she appears the man is without his soul. Perhaps it will yet happen.’

‘No!’

‘You sound so sure—or are you basically afraid of the idea of marriage and all it entails?’

‘I’m content with what I have.’

‘An existence all on one level, Miss Lakeside? The heights can never be reached for a woman alone.’

‘Surely that goes for a man as well, if you are talking about the emotional side and not just the physical?’

Ja, for a man it is also sadly true, no heights, no suspension among the stars.’

‘Are you a romantic at heart, *mynheer*?’

‘If to be romantic is to know that there is something always a little out of reach, until one day it is suddenly there, tangible, touchable, visible.’

He broke off, a sigh dropping from his lips. ‘Yes, perhaps I was romantic, for I was aware of this—this strange unseen but *felt* presence in my life, waiting to take shape as a woman I could—love.’

Such unexpected words from Paul, who had always looked so aloofly sure of himself and how he meant to shape his life, taking in his own good time a cool and soignée wife who would grace his home and be intelligent in the company of his medical friends. Merlin’s eyes raced over his strong, commanding features and her gaze fell more slowly to the deep neck opening of his shirt ... he had seemed more complete than other men, with all his priorities firmly listed and little margin left for even a scribbled note that he wanted to fall in love and experience for himself all the mystery and excitement of falling for an unknown girl who might be unsuitable for a high-ranking surgeon. It had seemed a foregone conclusion that he meant to select a wife from among the smart, socially well-placed women whom he dated.

Love? Strangely enough Merlin had never been able to imagine the commanding Paul van Setan in the grip of passion, his eyes stormy, his mouth hungry, his hair unruly on a hot forehead. He had seemed not to need that kind of emotion, an inspired healer of bodies rather than a lover.

How innocent her own love had been in those days ... how warm and aware it poured through her veins right now.

Human like this, though blinded, he was even more desirable and she had to grip her hands together in case they obeyed a compulsion of their own and reached out for the firm column of his neck and those powerful shoulders across which the brown silk was taut and just a few shades darker than his tanned skin. As she watched him he raised his grey eyes to the sky and she ached that he saw only blackness and none of the blueness. ..

Blue ... she looked as well and caught her breath. The sky was darkly mottled in patches and the sun had a sulphurous look.

'Has the daylight darkened?' Paul demanded.

'Yes, it has.' For a startled moment she wondered if he could see a little.

'I thought so! The sun has cooled against the skin, which means it isn't direct any more but is being diffused by a thickening haze. Am I correct?'

'Yes—does that mean?'

'Assuredly. Can you see anything of Ramai? He should have been back by now to tell us what Lon has picked up on the radio.'

'I can't see him about—should I go and look for him?'

Ja. Paul struck the rail of the veranda with his fist. 'I feel so helpless, damn it, having to rely on others to do what I would have done with more efficiency. Curse the gods for this! Curse that little bitch for what she did to me!'

Merlin closed her eyes against a deep stab of pain. 'I—I'll go and find Ramai.'

She was about to dart away when Paul's voice arrested her.

'Shoes!' he rapped at her. 'Go and put them on before you go down to the valley in search of the boy—no, better to find Lon. Ramai has parents and a batch of siblings in the *kampong* and he may have gone first to them with possible bad news. Find Lon!'

'Yes.'

'And don't worry too much. These things—blow over.' His smile was sardonic as he turned away from her and seemed to be looking at that bruised sky. His profile might have been sculptured except for the muscle that worked in his jaw; he was a man of action who hungered to do something decisive, but he knew that being blind he could only get in the way of those who would have to set about shuttering the house and making it as secure as possible.

Merlin hastened indoors and ran upstairs on trembling legs. She felt as if the typhoon had already set up its storm in her heart, more potently filled with Paul than ever before, brimming with a love she had to keep bottled inside her. There in her room she flung open the cupboard in which she kept her clothes and quickly laced her feet into a pair of plimsolls from her nursing days. Before leaving the room curiosity made her take a look at her reflection in the mirror that stood on a carved chest ... she stared at herself as if at the face of a stranger, seeing the shadowed hollows under her cheekbones and the poignancy of her own mouth. She realised that what she felt for Paul had fined her face to these interesting contours and subtle shadings; she had a new kind of look, not exactly a prettiness, for there was a coy sweetness to being pretty, but noticeable, eye-catching, something that would induce an observer to wonder about her.

She lifted her hands to her cheeks in an uncertain way, and her own eyes seemed to quiver with mocking little lights. Little fool, had she thought that she could feel so ardently about a man and not have it show? She had come in pity to Paul van Setan and now she found that pity had turned to passion. He had only to enter a room and her heart seemed to turn over ... she hadn't known that love could be so physically tormenting, and had truly believed she could serve him and it would be enough to be a sort of—acolyte.

But this was Paul, not some kind of ascetic parson, and there was no way to end the torment except by being tough enough to pack her belongings and leave him.

Leave Paul ... she backed away from the distress that sprang into her reflected eyes, those flecks of gold giving her brown eyes a fevered look. She turned and ran from the room, down the stairs, finding Paul gone from the veranda as she made her way in the direction of the tea valley.

There were gashes of crimson in the sulphurous sky and the heat was like a pressure on the head. A tropical weight of air laden with the scent of tea-bushes, and what the rising wind was stirring out of the jungle where many kinds of trees were entangled in webs of liana, a long rope-like vine that wove itself in and out of the branches, lacing them together and studding them with strangely delicate flowers. Her forehead was beaded with moisture and dragon lizards scurried from her path, rough steps cut in the side of this immense bowl of fragrant tea.

She could also smell nutmeg and pepper and the wild mimosa clustering at the edge of the valley. A benign and ancient stone god reclined beneath the entwined branches of a huge old banyan.

Jiwa merah, she thought. Soul land where the women became the souls of the men they loved. It was like poetry, disturbing and sensual like the scents that were growing headier as the storm gathered its forces. Deep and primal, rooted in a belief that no longer seemed relevant in the modern world she had abandoned for this island ... that love was still the most passionate experience of a lifetime, whether or not it gave joy or pain.

Merlin raised her eyes to the smoking gold of the sun ... leaves rattled sharply in a sudden gust of wind and almost stunning was the impact of tea-bush and spice trees. She clutched a handful of liana to hold her to the steps, for the wind had clawed at her shirt and swept her hair across her eyes, and she heard the monkeys chattering in a high-pitched way in the foliage of the forest.

The typhoon was coming closer and soon it would roar its way across Pulau-Indah, smashing and uprooting and destroying, and whatever happened, whatever the cost, Merlin was glad she'd be with Paul. She flung back her hair and gave the sultry sun a defiant look ... she was part of all this, even if it tore out her heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE day had grown forbiddingly dark ... a restless, menacing darkness. Merlin had found Lon and had it confirmed that a typhoon was heading this way.

Already the wind had a high-pitched whine to it and the palm tree foliage was in perpetual motion, whipping back and forth, until quite suddenly a branch would snap off with a sharp click and go flying away.

Relentlessly it was coming, and Lon had told her to return at once to the Tiger House and inform the *tuan* that the people of the village were going to shelter in the tea valley; they were nervous of the big wind and down in the valley it didn't sound quite so forceful. She was to ask Paul if he would be coming down as well, but Merlin knew the answer in advance. He wouldn't budge from the house, but he would probably suggest that she join the villagers and their children; he might even insist, and Merlin was all girded up for a battle of wills.

There was no way, short of throwing her down the cliffside, that he would get her to leave him to face the typhoon alone. He wasn't made of stone. As the storm intensified he'd need company like everyone else.

She flinched at the heaving, creaking sound the palms were making, and the moaning that seemed caught in the big banana fronds. And deep in the forest she heard the devilish tattoo that Ramai had spoken about, the rain arriving on the mass of foliage that formed almost a solid roof over the tangled mass of bush and vine.

The wind-chimes swung crazily as she mounted the steps to the veranda and paused to catch her breath in that section of the porch that was screened for coolness by a huge knotted creeper whose tough stems were thick with flowers, aromatic and deep gold. Her fingers combed the hair from her brow, and she watched as a great red-tinged cloud sailed into the sky and seemed to cast flame over the thatched roof of the house.

Suddenly a young houseboy came running from the direction of the kitchen and seeing Merlin he came to where she was and brushed a hand across wet eyes.

It was Tutup, the boy who led Paul when he wanted to go to the beach or the *kampong*. '*Tuan* say I must go to valley without him, *nonya*. He blind, not see, be killed by big wind up here! You tell him come!'

'You tell him *go*.' Paul's voice seemed to leave a vibration in the air. 'The little pup dared to argue with me, but I won't leave here, and I won't have him up here when it really begins, and it's going to, eh? Lon confirmed it?'

'Yes, *mynheer*.' She cast a sympathetic look at Tutup, who was devoted to Paul and who looked stricken by his master's unexpected harshness. 'You had better do as you're told, Tutup. Your family is down there with all the others and you don't want to make your mother anxious.'

'You will go this instant,' Paul insisted, 'and you will take the *mevrouw* with you, do you hear me? Hurry before the rain starts lashing down.'

The boy looked obstinate. 'Why I have to go with woman? You come too, *tuan*, or

let me stay.'

'You will do as you are darned well told, my boy. And so will you, Miss Lakeside.' Paul stood there looking in the general direction of Merlin, his hair roughly tousled from the wind and an iron set to his jaw. 'I won't have an hysterical woman and a child on my hands when this things hits us. Have some sense, the pair of you! I'm blind as a blasted bat and I'd be of no use to either of you should you be hurt, so you will both do as you are told and be off while you can still climb down those cliff steps without being blown down them.'

'Come on, Tutup.' Merlin had decided instantly what she was going to do, and taking the boy by the hand she hurried him away from the irate Paul. 'It's no use to argue, and you should be with your family.'

'*Tuan* be all alone.' The boy tried to drag her back towards that solitary figure, standing there unseeing, with the palm crowns crashing above his head and the rain increasing its volume. Lightning flickered, red-tipped, like angry barbs.

'Do come on,' she said urgently, but when they reached the valley steps and the stabs of lightning were turning to prongs, she let go the boy's hand and called out to some other people to take him down with them to join his family.

'The *tuan's* orders,' she told them. She had no intention of obeying those orders herself, and could hear Tutup yelling with protest as she hastened back towards the house. The air was rampant with the moist, earthy scent of jungle flowers being bruised by the rain that was now coming down solidly. Her shirt and pants were plastered to her before she reached the compound of the house and her hair was like a wet whip lashing against her skin as she ran those last few yards and flung herself up the steps. Raucous parrot cries mingled with the belting rain and the whining wind.

'Who is that?' Paul towered in the dimness of the porch, nostrils flared.

'It's me.' Merlin said breathlessly. 'I've seen to it that Tutup has gone down to the valley.'

'You! I told you, ordered you to go with him!' Merlin stood before that angry figure and felt her knees lock with actual terror as temper flared in his eyes, flame thrown on to oil when she added: 'You can't be alone up here. I want to keep you company, *mynheer*.'

'You want?' He took a violent step towards her. 'I'm the one who's in charge, not some snip of a woman who has never faced a typhoon before. I don't want you, do you hear me? Crying and whining all over the place when the wind reaches full force and seems as if it will never relax its hold on the eardrums. Now get out and leave me alone! There's still time.'

'You can't see the lightning,' she shot back at him, frightened though she was of the temper she had released in him. 'I'd sooner face you than run through that one more time. I shall be struck if I go out in it!'

'You might be struck if you stay here.' His fist clenched, as if he truly felt like hitting her for her disobedience. 'You are a damn fool, *mevrouw*, do you realise it? If you get hurt I couldn't see to put a bandage on you properly.' 'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'stop feeling so sorry for yourself!' 'What—what did you say?' He looked struck himself.

'You heard me, *mynheer*. You want to be in charge of things, but because you'd only get in the way, you are taking your temper out on me. The villagers will be all right with Lon, and I am staying here.'

'You know what I'd do with you if I had my sight like other men?' He looked grim as he stood there, his shirt and trousers moulded to his body by the wind, the pillars of the veranda making of it a proper setting for a dramatic scene.

Yes, she thought, you'd see me, recognise me, and not merely march me out of your house but throw me out, into the storm! 'I know I'm being obstinate,' she said. 'But could you leave someone alone in a typhoon while you streaked off to a hole in the ground, someone who couldn't see to defend himself? What do you take me for, *mynheer*?'

'A damned little fool! All right, expose yourself to danger, but don't come howling to me for comfort when the furies are let loose, and by God they'll be let loose before very long. Was there any information on the radio about that?'

'Lon said the news was that the typhoon was in this area, but he also said that they're unpredictable phenomena and it might pass in another direction.'

'Let us pray so! All the same the winds will be bad—the villagers know that and they have taken sensible pre cautions. Now why don't you do as you're told?'

'No chance, *mynheer*.' She glanced across the compound, where the water was cascading out of the sky rather than falling like the rain she had known in England. 'You can hear the rain.'

'Yes,' he said grimly. 'You must be wet?'

'Somewhat.' She felt her shirt with a wry smile. Beneath it her skin was uncomfortably damp and her hair was still dripping.

'Then you had better go and dry yourself. I am going around the house to make sure all the shutters are in place—the heavier ceiling lamps were taken down before the boys left, and pictures and ornaments put safely away. Go to your room and get dry.'

'Am I to stay there—as a sort of punishment?'

'Now don't add petulance to foolish disobedience,' he rejoined. 'When you have changed your clothing you will see about some lunch for us, while I decide where best we might find a little sanctuary from the tumult when it arrives. Go!'

Take a hot shower. A chill in this sultry atmosphere is easily come by.'

Merlin left him and made her way upstairs to her room, feeling a trifle exhausted by that battle of wills. Whatever lay in store for them in the coming hours, at least they would be together. She wouldn't have to endure the torment of knowing he was alone up here, entombed in a darkness made into a nightmare by the baying winds, like hell hounds let loose, their fangs tearing open the sky in rips and gashes of scarlet.

She stood at the windows of her room and there above the valley, through the pelting rain, it was as if Krakatoa had burst again and lit the sky with ominous fire.

Flickers of flame-tipped lightning through the bruised, deepening darkness. Soon it would be like night, and she shivered, dragged off her wet things and hastened into the bathroom that was fitted into a curving alcove of her bedroom. She stood under the

shower-head and turned the tap, the warmth of the spray gradually taking the chill from her body. Wrapped sarong-like in a large towel she returned to the bedroom, walking across the creamy rugs of the blackwood floor. She lit the lamps of opal glass on copper bases, watching as the wicks bloomed, bringing some illusion of cosiness back into the room, with its carved furniture and vast bed of teak and ivory brocade embroidered with scarlet poppies.

She had just laid down the match box, for all the lamps in the house were lit by kerosene, when a movement in the mirror caught her eye. She gave a start and swung round to face the figure standing in her doorway. Paul! She gripped the towel closer around her, as if her body was visible to him.

‘W-what do you want?’ Her voice shook uncontrollably.

‘It’s all right,’ he drawled. ‘I haven’t decided to make an orgy of what might be my last few hours on earth. You are quite safe from a blind man’s gropings, *mevrouw*. I merely came to see about your shutters—have you closed them?’

‘No.’ Her entire body felt as if it were burning with in the folds of the towel, for in that instant of seeing him at her threshold the crazy thought had flashed across her mind that he had come in search of—comfort. Yes, why not call it that?

A woman in his arms while the storm raged, and loving him so desperately Merlin would not have resisted him. As it was, his sarcastic retort had made her feel as if she was scorching on the cone of Krakatoa.

‘Every shutter in the house must be secured,’ he said. ‘I had better close them for you.’ He moved forward into the room, but this one, unlike most of the downstairs rooms, had thick, shaggy rugs scattered here and there on the floor, and Paul had caught the toe of his shoe on one of them before Merlin could cry a warning. He went sprawling as she jumped forward, the towel falling away from her bare body as she caught at his arms in the instant he fell hard “to his knees, his face contorting more with anger than actual pain.

‘You don’t have to come to my rescue.’ He flung out a hand and it struck her across the breast ... she saw the instant shock register on his face as the feel of her was transmitted from his fingers to his brain.

An exclamation in Dutch broke from his lips and she could feel him looking right at her and yet not seeing her white skin where the mark of his hand was still visible.

‘You must forgive me!’ Yet his face was like iron as he said the words. ‘I had no idea—you have just bathed, of course, and I blundered in like the blind fool I am. I will go—’

‘No, not like that,’ she caught at his arm, ‘thinking you have done something terrible. You stumbled and couldn’t help yourself, and what does it matter if I have no clothes on? You—you were a surgeon—the human body is no mystery to you, *mynheer*. You went down with an awful thud. Are you all right?’

‘I—I am fine.’ He rose to his feet and stood there, fumbling a hand across his hair. ‘I had no right to invade your privacy—I have embarrassed you, and I struck you. Are you sure?’

'I hardly felt it.' A statement that was totally untrue, for where his hand had been her skin still tingled, not so much from the pain of the blow but from the intimacy of it, his fingers against the bare soft curving of her body. Her teeth fastened upon her bottom lip. She had to pray that the incident had been too swift for him to have realised that she was smoothly firm where a much older woman would have lost muscle tone. She jerked the damp hair out of her eyes and felt a nerve twitching in her lip.

'This is no moment for tragedy, *Un bel di*,' he mocked, as if sensing her distress.

'You are not *Madam Butterfly* and I am certainly not Pinkerton. Direct me to the shutters, but first put on your robe.'

Merlin fumbled with it, a kimono wrap patterned with persimmons, one of several garments she had purchased down in the *kampong*, from the women who sewed the charming things by hand. Then she reached out and lightly took his hand, and he moved with her to where the big teak shutters were still folded back against the wall.

'Now I can manage.' He drew his hand from hers, rather curtly, and it brushed the silky material of her kimono. He frowned as he began to adjust the shutters over the wind-shaken windows. . . what was going through his mind, she wondered, that for a starchy spinster she had a suspiciously exotic taste in bedroom apparel?

Now her room was dark but for the pools of lamplight and she was so consumed by the awareness of Paul in the intimacy of her bedroom that she drew as far away as possible from another accidental encounter with his hand.

She stood there, clad as if for *Madam Butterfly*, but the scene was straight out of *Samson et Dalila* and stark in her mind was the way Paul had stumbled and fallen to his knees, all that decisive self-assurance he had once possessed so lost to him that a mere rug could trip him, and she tried to imagine how hellish it must be for a blind man to feel himself falling. She felt a sudden wetness at the edges of her eyes and her throat ached as he turned from the closed shutters and stood there, so outwardly tall and in command of himself.

'Are there any pictures on the walls that could fall and cause you an injury?' he asked.

She quickly brushed a hand across her blurred vision and glanced around the Jade Room, so called because of the lovely green colour of the walls and ceiling. There were several paintings, but they were made on silk, the feathery brush strokes of an oriental artist whose trees and figures were dreamlike, leaning over insubstantial bridges.

'A few small paintings,' she told Paul. 'Chinese, I think. Rather lovely in a strange sort of way.'

'Ah, then leave them where they are. You like your room? You have now grown accustomed to sleeping here?'

'Yes, it's a most attractive room, a great deal different from the bedsitter I had before I came here.' She flinched from a mental picture of that drab boarding-house just off the Tottenham Road, those worn stairs leading up to the dingy landing, and that eternal smell of boiled cabbage and cheap floor polish. 'You can have no idea, *mynheer*, how glamorous my surroundings seem to me after lodgings in a rather dreary part of London.'

‘Will you still regard this place as glamorous, I wonder, if we live through this night, you and I?’

‘I—I hope so. And it does seem like night already, so dark and stormy outside, with the lamps lit inside.’

He gazed around him, eyebrows drawn together, as if he were trying to imagine how the room looked, and what it was like to see the glow of lamps.

He knew the furniture was carved teak, and the drapings of eastern silk ... was he picturing against this background a skinny, glamour-starved, drab-haired woman who had spent most of her life in those grey shadows reserved for the lonely and unloved? That was the image she had deliberately created for herself, and he wasn’t to know that as her hair dried against the silk of the silvery kimono it had a honey-ambered gleam in the lamplight, matching her eyes fixed upon his brooding face.

Then he moved, taking a step forward. ‘Are there any more of those rugs lying in wait to trip me?’ he asked.

‘I—I’ll show you to the door, *mynheer*.’ As she moved across to him the kimono made a soft, silky sound around her bare legs, then she felt his fingers within hers, tense as iron, as she led him to the door.

‘It isn’t like me to be confused like this,’ he said, with sudden harshness. ‘It must be the weather—tell me something, you are wearing a silk wrap, aren’t you? What colour is it?’

‘A silvery shade—sort of grey,’ she added hastily, for grey seemed more appropriate to the image he must carry of her ... she dared not let him imagine that the kimono somehow made her appealing, with its wide sleeves and pearly sheen.

Then, before she realised his intention, he had suddenly moved his hand inside her right sleeve and she felt his fingers enclose the slimness of her bare arm. She couldn’t help it, but his touch thrilled her to the base of her spine, those sensitive fingertips playing against her skin, so unbearably exciting, yet she had to martyr her feelings and snatch her arm out of his reach. But she wasn’t quick enough, and his fingers had locked like a steel shackle around her wrist and she could feel his thumb pressed against her pounding pulse.

‘You’re as nervous as a kitten,’ he said. ‘Is it me, or that typhoon somewhere out there?’

‘Th-the wind is awfully high-pitched, and I’ve never heard rain like that before, like showers of knives falling out of the sky on to the roof.’ There was no controlling the excited race of her pulse and Merlin knew it; all she could hope was that Paul would think her highly-strung state was due to the storm.

‘You don’t like a man to touch you, do you?’ he said. ‘I can feel it, sense it.’

Have you always been this way?’

Merlin gazed up at him, her eyes filled with his face, her slim body aching all over for the touch she had to deny. ‘I suppose I have, doctor,’ she had to play it lightly or go out of her head. ‘There’s a word for it, isn’t there? Frigidity? Plain women develop the symptom in order to avoid being ridiculed. It wouldn’t do, would it, for a dried-up maiden lady to exhibit any awareness of sexuality. Over the years it becomes second nature and in the end

my sort are repelled when a man puts his hand on us—but you were a medical man and I suppose I'm silly to mind if you—take my pulse.'

'Is that what I'm doing, *mevrouw*?

'Yes, you're counting my heartbeat and you're wondering if I shall run amok when the typhoon reaches its climax. I shan't, you know. Old maids are very strong-willed. It comes of standing on their own two feet without the assistance of a man. You really won't have to tie me down. I shall get our lunch and try not to break all the plates.'

The high tension of the moment was increased by the mounting brutality of the wind that seemed to take hold of the shutters and give them a malevolent shake.

Merlin saw the blinding white flash of the lightning through the ribs of the shutters, glaring over the house like the eye of a monster that waited to destroy it. She shivered and felt the bite of Paul's finger into her flesh and bone, holding her like a doll in front of him while the mental images jagged in and out of her mind ... the waves filled with violence as they swept in over the beach ... the rattan roofs of the village houses gradually torn into shreds, their sheltering palms a welter of broken fronds.

Eden at the mercy of the angry gods ... it was no use, she couldn't live on an island like this one and not be affected by the prevailing belief in the old pagan gods, and there was something so overpowering in the wind and the lashing rain and the lightning that flared so fiercely it seemed as if it must burn the sky.

'Yes, it's getting worse,' Paul said, reading her mind even if he couldn't see the dismay on her face. 'I warned you, and though you spoke just now with a brave flippancy, all that clamour is going to increase until your nerves start to go to shreds. Face it, Miss Lakeside! You are holed up in a house with a man who can be thrown on his face by a rug. You are utterly and absolutely alone with me, *mevrouw*, and God alone knows how long this storm will go on. It may not abate until the morning, and in the meantime it will be hell let loose and it may well kill us.

'Tell me,' he shook her wrist, hurtfully, 'did you realise when you applied to come here as my secretary that there are no idyllic places on this earth and that we pay for every bite of the apple that we take? Eden, my dear woman, is a myth and a fantasy. There's no lasting paradise for anyone!'

'I'm not a child,' she rejoined. 'I didn't come here with the notion of finding—paradise. I came, knowing what I might have to face up to.'

Words that were of far more significance than he realised, for she had known that she might have to face an emotional storm that would be even harder to bear than a natural one. Her every moment on Pulau-Indah was menaced, and *he* was the waiting force that could rip her apart.

'A woman of character, eh?' But he wasn't mocking her, and Merlin saw a thoughtful look on his face a moment or two before he released her wrist from his fingers. 'Come downstairs as soon as you are dressed, and bring with you anything you might require during the day. It will be safer downstairs, to a certain extent.'

He turned to the door and walked away with that firm tread that would deceive

anyone who didn't know that he was blind; she stood there and listened until he reached the stairs, where his footsteps were more deliberate, more careful, as he descended to the ground floor. Then she slowly relaxed and went to the clothes cupboard, where she stood for a moment debating what to wear. She supposed she ought to choose something sensible, just in case the worst happened and they found themselves scrambling about in mud and water, but when she reached inside the cupboard Merlin didn't choose a pair of slacks and sweater, she chose instead a long thick silk skirt in tulip-red and a shirt of ivory shantung. If she and Paul were in possible danger of annihilation, then she wasn't going to spend her last hours on earth clad in drab, functional clothes.

With a smile that was just a little reckless she laid the tulip-coloured skirt across her bed, along with the silk shirt. Then she took her best lingerie from the drawer and a pair of sheer tights. Almost with a sense of going to a party Merlin dressed herself, and afterwards she sat at the dressing-table and arranged her hair as she had seen some of the island women arrange theirs, rolled to the crown of her head in the style called split-peach, which she secured with a gemmed pin.

Her eyes looked enormous in the lamplight, gazing back at her from the depths of the mirror, and the tiny mole at the corner of her left eye seemed to blend with the oriental hairstyle to give her a rather exotic look. She ran a powder-puff over her skin and applied colour to her lips. When she stood up the mirror gave back to her a slender, unusual image, and she couldn't suppress a little sigh. If only Paul might see her and, perhaps, like her a little bit.

Like her? If Paul ever found out who she was, then he'd hate her ... with a hatred as black as the blindness she had helped to cause.

She stared at herself and wondered what the devil she was doing dressing up like this. Paul would hear the whispering movement of her long skirt and wonder if the storm had sent her out of her mind. He'd think her an idiot, and she was ... playing the role of Delilah up to the hilt!

Yet she couldn't bring herself to change into something sensible ... the pillars of this house might be brought down on her head, and Paul's, and for once in her life she wanted to be dressed for the occasion. Even if Paul couldn't see her, he would sense that she was as elegantly dressed as if they were dining at a smart restaurant instead of waiting for a typhoon to come hurtling down on the great thatched roof of the Tiger House.

With a defiant tilt to her chin Merlin applied a little perfume rod to the backs of her ears and the pool of her throat, even the inner bend of her elbows. It wasn't a discreet dash of lavender, but a scent which had been purposely mixed for her in a cave-like shop in the village bazaar, where in her free time she often wandered, mixing with the islanders, making friends with them, and learning some of their quaint customs.

It was a subtle aroma, with the faintest dash of musk, and for an instant she panicked. Paul, with his heightened senses, would be aware of the exotic scent the moment they were alone together, and it had to be remembered, for it was her only safeguard, that he believed her to be a middle-aged spinster.

Oh lord ... whatever was he going to think? Perhaps she had better wash off the stuff ... and yet it blended with the look she had created for herself, her tortoiseshell hair swept up into the two coiled halves of a split peach, the soft pale silk of her shirt blending into the lush red silk of her skirt. She was reluctant to discard glamour for her usual unremarkable neatness. She was in love, and this might be her last day on earth, and she wanted to sound silky, and to smell scented, when she served Paul with his food ... like one of those graceful girls of the island in the long opalescent wrap-around that made them seem subservient and at the same time so enticing. A girl couldn't run in a long skirt, and it was a subtle way of letting the man know that she didn't wish to run away from him.

Merlin stroked her hands down over her hips, fine-boned under the silk. In the past she had never sought to look glamorous, believing that it couldn't be achieved and she'd end up looking a fool. But something in the island atmosphere had got into her blood, and what she felt for Paul had certainly got into her eyes, into the contours of her face, and even into her hah- which under the touch of her fingers felt as smooth as her silk clothing.

Through the mirror, through the ribs of the shutters, the lightning jabbed like steel knives. Wasn't this the way the sacrificial girls had gone to face Baal, hair and face beautified, slender body encased in silk, to be lifted on to the flaming mouth of the terrible god and swallowed whole, like some luscious morsel that like the turtle screamed as it died.

Merlin shook her head at herself. 'You're crazy,' she told herself, and turning away from her disturbing reflection she collected her handbag, a couple of books, and a handkerchief, and after turning out the lamps she walked from her room with that grace of movement that a long skirt imparts to a woman.

And Delilah played the harlot, she thought, and Samson lost his eyes!

As she went downstairs the house seemed to pitch and roll like a ship in a storm, but in reality the sensation was in her head, induced by the winds and her heightened nerves. She stood gripping the balustrade, suspended, it seemed, between hell and the strangest of heavens. It was incredible, but here she was in the heart of a storm, in a house which that havoc might wreck, entirely alone with the only person in the world who truly mattered to her. Her heart pounded beneath the silk of her shirt, and the hem of her skirt caressed her ankles as she went on down the stairs, creating a sensuous whispering that she was aware of with her blood even as the noise of the wind-driven rain lashed at her ears.

She saw that the great lanterns of hammered bronze had been taken down from the stairwell, everything movable had been put out of harm's way and there in the big stone-flagged kitchen she had to hunt for plates and a salad bowl, having found cold spare-ribs in the larder that would go down rather well with celery, tomatoes and sliced cucumber, with a big stick of bread, and a pot of strong coffee.

All the time she worked Merlin could feel the vibrations in and around the house, the whining pitch of the wind as it tore at a tree, and the way it hurled itself at the storm doors which Paul had firmly closed, pushing items of furniture against them as added protection.

Merlin knew that nothing would keep them safe from the typhoon if when it struck they were at the centre of it, but in the meantime the heavy doors kept the elements from

being driven inside and they gave a sense of security that was welcome, for the rain was falling in such torrents that the kitchen felt to Merlin as if it were undersea. A pair of hurricane lamps provided light, and there at the big wooden table she prepared the strangest meal of her life. At last everything was arranged on a trolley, the salad and spare-ribs, with sliced sweet potatoes she had fried in butter. Rice cakes and pickled plums, the long-spouted coffee pot, and cups with sugar and cream.

She wheeled the trolley to the door, not sorry to be leaving the kitchen that echoed with the sounds of the storm. When she reached the hall she called out for Paul, not knowing in which room he intended them to have lunch. She was glancing into the austere dining-room when she heard him at the far end of the hall.

'This way, *mevrouw*,' he called out to her. 'Ah, I hear the trolley, and I must admit I'm ravenous.'

'A rather mixed *koffietafel*,' she informed him, as she arrived at his side.

'I smell coffee, and right now I could eat just about anything. It is strange, eh, how danger intensifies our hungers? This, *mevrouw*, is the room where we shall share the typhoon, and with luck live through it. Please to enter.'

Merlin wheeled the trolley inside, finding the room fairly small and completely walled in lovely old tiles, faded to the hue of dusty blue velvet. It had a heavy teak door and reclining chairs in bamboo. Here again hurricane lamps had been lit, playing an amber light over a lacquered cabinet and a model of a Chinese junk whose ivory-wood and shining wires seemed to be on the move in the quivering light.

It was a room embedded in the very centre of the house, and after Paul had closed the door and pushed the bolt into place, he pulled a cord and set in motion a ceiling fan with teakwood blades. Merlin smelled the dust as the blades began to rotate, and she smiled admiringly at Paul's capability, which even his blindness couldn't totally impair.

'Well, what are you thinking?' he asked.

'That's it's a vast relief, *mynheer*, to have some of the noise shut out.

'The fan squeaks a little, but we need the ventilation, and we'll pretend it's mice. You aren't afraid of mice, are you?'

'No, as a matter of fact I used to keep white ones when I was a child.'

'Ah, childhood, how many dreams away for both of us! Is there a table in here, otherwise I'll fetch one.'

Merlin glanced around and saw a floor-table tucked away in a corner of the room, of shining hardwood with a trim of pearly shell. 'There's one of those low oriental tables, and we'll have to sit on the floor to eat from it.'

'Do you mind doing that?'

'Not at all. The chairs have squab cushions, so we can use those to make ourselves comfortable.'

'Excellent. Almost all the comforts of home.'

'The walls are completely tiled, *mynheer*. Did you know?'

Ja, I went round feeling them and that's why I decided we would take shelter in

this little lair. Come, let us have coffee and food! It smells good.'

'There's only cold meat, I'm afraid, but the sweet potatoes are hot and there's a salad. I'll arrange the table and cushions and wait on you.

'Like a *geisha*.'

'Wh-what makes you say that?'

He seemed to find her face with his blind eyes and she saw a faint smile twitch his lips. 'You are still wearing your kimono?'

'No—I have on a long skirt.'

'Of silk, eh? I can hear it as you move about.'

'Yes—defiance of the storm gods.' She could feel herself blushing. 'A little foolish, no doubt, and not very practical, but I couldn't resist wearing something that I might not get the chance to wear again.'

'You mean to go in style, eh? You should have told me you meant to dress up, then I'd have worn something a little smarter.'

'You look fine,' she said, seeing the dust across his forehead, his sweat-tousled hair, the rip in his trousers. He shattered her, the way he looked ... a blind man who had done all he could to make this house as secure as possible from the rage of the storm. She wanted to approach him, to wrap her arms around him and kiss his dirty face ... let her lips be free with all the love words that clamoured inside her to be expressed.

She fetched the table from the alcove, gathered up the cushions and arranged them at either side of a short-legged table. She guided Paul to his seat and as he took a lounging position he seemed to lean a little towards her and she saw the tensing of his nostrils. He had caught the fragrance of her perfume and as she set the plates and served the food she waited for him to make a sardonic remark.

Something to the effect that she not only rustled around like a *geisha* but was all scented up like one.

'*Trimahkisi*h,' he murmured, as she laid a napkin across his knees and guided his hand to the level of the table.

'I know what you're thinking,' she just had to say something, 'that I'm dressed up and scented up like—like some tart. I don't know what got into me!'

You must think I've taken leave of my senses?'

'I truly don't think anything of the sort.' he assured her, taking a spare-rib into his fingers and holding it poised for a bite. 'It strikes me as perfectly natural that a woman should find some opportunity to wear a dress she has only recently bought. You are wearing eastern silk, for it has an almost sensual sound as it moves against the skin of a woman, and so I realise that you have been shopping in the *kampong*. And there you also bought the perfume, eh? Rather more effective than lavender water, if you don't mind my saying so.'

His lips quirked and he took a hungry bite of the cold meat. Merlin shot him a questioning look as she lifted the coffeepot and filled their cups. 'You do think I'm a fool, don't you, *mynheer*?''

'No, I think you are a shy woman who has rarely dared to be yourself. Why shouldn't

you indulge in a little vanity? There are females who indulge vices you would neither understand nor be capable of executing, so for the sake of heaven don't call yourself a tart! You felt for once the natural urge to let the woman in you take over from the efficient secretary, and I do assure you that if your perfume offended me, I would request that you scrub it off. This is an excellent salad dressing, by the way.'

'I'm glad you like it.' She placed his cup of coffee within reach of his hand, and as always she felt a sense of wonderment as she watched the adept way he handled the act of eating, which to a sighted person offered none of the complications which someone blind came up against. She had taken care to lay his utensils exactly as they were laid by the houseboy, and to place his food as if his plate was a quarter-hour clock, with his meat at the twelve position, his potatoes at three, the salad at six, and the bread at number nine. He then knew exactly where to place his knife and fork and could make conversation quite naturally, without fumbling with his food. Whenever *rijstaffel* was served, the various small dishes were placed in a clockwise position on the table, making it easier for him to select what he wanted.

Merlin pushed her own food around her plate and she was glad he had a good appetite even if she didn't feel very hungry. She had a fateful feeling that the tragedy which had started in London was going to come to a climax here on the island of Pulau-Indah ... the tempest, untamed and ferocious, was building up and she and Paul were facing together what might be their last hours on earth. It was said that confession was good for the soul, but she wanted him to go on respecting her right up to the end ... she shrank from him ever knowing who she really was.

'You must eat your lunch,' he said, having caught the restless movements of her knife and fork. 'It might be hours before we eat again, for as the storm intensifies it will be safer if you remain here in this room. Come, you have provided an excellent meal and food inside you will help dispel the nervous tension. Eat, *mevrouw*, that is an order. I don't want a fainting woman on my hands, for how should I cope with the method of revival when you are wearing that long silk skirt? It would be most awkward getting your head between your knees, *ja*?'

'The mind boggles, *mynheer*.' She broke into a smile, and started to eat her lunch, enjoying far more the luxury of feasting her eyes on Paul, lounging there on his cushions, casually eating pickled plums, the light of the hurricane lamps playing over his face. His grey eyes had a sheen to them under the heavy lids, as of oyster-shell, full of light and yet looking only into blackness as he seemed to gaze at her from across the table.

'We face damnation or heaven,' he said, his eyes so strangely brilliant above the sculptured bones of his face. 'I think I am glad that you stayed to keep me company, Miss Lakeside. At least I have had a good lunch.'

Merlin felt her heart's movement ... she knew that Paul was thanking her in his own way for not leaving him to face the typhoon in his lonely darkness.

'You are welcome, *mynheer*,' she replied. 'Would you like some more coffee?'

'If you please, my *geisha*.'

CHAPTER FIVE

As the afternoon waned the winds had reached such force that Paul estimated they must be tearing across the ocean and the island at the rate of fifty to sixty miles an hour, and they still hadn't reached the peak of their intensity.

The ocean swell would be terrific, he told Merlin, the sea rising to meet the rain-drenched skies in a kind of cauldron that a gigantic ladle would be stirring round and round in an anti-clockwise motion.

'Do you think we might be in the eye of the storm?' she asked him.

'The devil's eye,' he drawled, cheroot smoke pluming from his lips. 'If so it will come like a clap of doom and there will be no time for goodbye or regret. Put another record on the gramophone, *mevrouw*. Let us stay as cheerful as possible, and those old recordings help to drown out some of the noise.'

He had found the ancient wind-up machine in the den, along with a box of equally old-fashioned records and they had passed some of the time playing them. He had also brought a bottle and a pair of glasses from that trip to the den; bang wine, he had said, which he was saving for the moment when he felt it would be most needed. He had smiled and explained that bang wine was a slang term for champagne used by the islanders, and upon this occasion more than appropriate.

Merlin sorted through the records and found an oldie with a sentimental title *Goodnight, My Love*. That, too, was appropriate, and as she wound up the gramophone she watched Paul in his bamboo long-chair, his large frame at ease but always a listening tension to the way he held his head. He was waiting, listening with ears far more acute than hers, to the signal for the opening of that long necked bottle with the gold foil around the cork. It was a good champagne, a powerful one, and she knew that he meant to blot out for her that moment, should it come, when the typhoon would rush down on them and sweep them into eternity. She knew it could happen, and the courage she had found to face it was rooted in Paul ... he was all and everything to her, so passionately at the centre of her being that she wanted nothing more than to live and die with him. The elemental forces all around them had brought that passion fully alive in her, and though it could never be released in a physical sense, at least she was free to love him with her eyes, with graceful movements of her body as she moved about the room, or knelt just beyond his hand as she listened to the music from another, more romantic time, when people had been unafraid to be sweet in their loving. The honeyed words of the old song filled the room, and the lids of Paul's eyes had a weight to them that Merlin wanted to touch with her fingertip, feeling the flutter of those gold lashes, bending forward with her heart on her lips to press kisses to where the pain had scorched away his sunlight.

Champagne to blot out the pain that might be waiting like a beast beyond those walls, and the yearning to give herself had to be kept in chains ... right up to the possible end the masquerade had to be played out that she was an old maid, grown passionless with the years. Only confusion, anger, could be her reward if she approached him right now and let

him discover that her body was young and her heart was eager, and that it didn't matter to her that his eyes were blind. He was a man, and a lonely one, and he might take what she offered, but there would be no real joy in it. He'd be scornful of what was flung at his head, unasked for. He was still so very proud ... still at heart a man who wanted to do his own choosing.

'How very sentimental people used to be,' he murmured. 'I'd give a lot to see that tired old moon descending—you know, the trouble with being blind is that a man begins to live on memories; the good ones seem sweeter and the bitter ones even more sharp and sour. There doesn't seem to be any awareness of a future, for how can a man look ahead when he can't even see?'

Merlin's arms tightened about her updrawn knees in the tulip silk, and her own slim knees were a poor substitute for the wide shoulders she longed to embrace.

'A memory that haunts me is of Amsterdam the last time I was there, at my grandmother's house,' ash fell from his cheroot, spattering his trousers, and he was unaware of it. 'A place so old the roof tiles are green-black as the shiny coat of a tramp, and rain, soft rain, had drenched the tulips in her garden and they shone like satin. I suppose you've never been there?'

'No, but it sounds lovely, *mynheer*.'

'It's a very nostalgic city, and nowhere does the beer taste so cool as at a table beside one of the old canals, with wild onions, brown bread and cream cheese.'

'Are you hungry, *mynheer*? I could make a snack.'

'No,' he shook his head. 'I'm only hungry for the old days—God, what would I give to have it all again, the modest pleasures, the hard work.'

'Please,' A sob broke from Merlin. 'I can't bear it.'

'You mustn't weep,' he exclaimed. 'I'm a thoughtless fool to talk in such a way, when your nerves are already over-stretched.'

'It just isn't fair that you—a man like you.' She couldn't go on and had to cram her knuckles in her mouth or cry it all out, how she felt about him, the part she had played in the tragedy, letting it pour from her system but in the process losing what she had gained of him. He had to hate what had hurt him and cost him his brilliant career, and she would be his target, as they might be the target of that typhoon that roared in the stormy darkness out there.

'I can feel you biting your knuckles,' Paul said sharply. 'If it will help to give way to a good cry, then give way.'

'But you said you couldn't stand a whining woman.'

'Merely a ruse to try and make you go down into the valley. If the typhoon comes this way, then it will take this house apart like some great beast from out of a Lovecraft story.'

'Then,' she forced the humour from twisted lips, 'if I give a curdling scream at the next loud noise you won't take me for a complete coward?'

'You are no coward,' he told her. 'You have spirit and feeling, and I couldn't wish for a better companion in a crisis. Your nurse's training, eh, and something tenacious in your

character.'

Twinges of panic and pleasure were induced by what he said, but her endurance was welded to his, to that core of steel in his nature; the tempered strength of a fine blade that could yield without breaking. The hardest, bravest test for her was that she couldn't find safety and sanctuary in his arms.

The music had died away and she lay back against the cushions of her long-chair and tried to relax. Long since her hair had loosened into a gleaming disarray about her shoulders, for every now and then she would press her hands to her ears, trying to shut out the sounds of trees whose very roots were being torn from deep in the soil, where they had stood since the days of the Dutch colonials.

She knew that small, defenceless animals and birds were being driven crazy and she was frightened she might hear their cries.

She had played all those rather scratchy records and she supposed they could play them all again, but somehow she couldn't make the effort to go and wind up the machine, and she could feel herself beginning to tremble.

'Why do cruel things have to happen?' she asked. 'All those pretty children—the islanders—I can't bear to think about it!'

'The people of Pulau-Indah are extremely nice, aren't they?' His face was stern and shadowed in the moody light of the hurricane lamps. 'I had to let them go to the valley, but I'm not certain it was a wise thing to do. A tidal wave would cost untold loss of life—all those merry-voiced children, who I feel sure are as pretty as they sound.'

'Many of them are really beautiful,' she said. 'And so are their mothers and older sisters—remarkably lovely, with long dark hair, and eyes that hold mystery and humour. I can't blame your cousin for being in love with one of them.'

'Do you think it might be a good idea if I followed his example, *mevrouw*?'

Paul's voice was both serious and a little cynical.

'Why not?' she said, forcing coolness and control into her voice. 'There isn't much to be gained from celibacy, is there? Loneliness can be hard to live with.'

'As you have learned, eh?'

'As I have learned.' Her voice tapered off, as if she were indeed a woman who had lived a long time with loneliness, who accepted it as inevitable.

She watched as shadows crept about the room, waiting, hoping for a lull in the wind, a slackening of the rain, a lessening of the shrill noises and the crashings from outside. Her nerves were unbearably strung, yet never had she felt so alive to every pulse beat of her body, every awesome movement, every expression that came and went across Paul's face. Beside him on an elbow table stood a brass elephant whose harness seemed to move in the shifting shadows ... and then she stiffened and leaned forward and her breath seemed to get locked in her throat. Something was moving on that table, and Paul's hand was resting on his chair-arm just an inch or so from that section of the table, and the thing that moved was at least six inches long, with scarlet legs and mandibles. ..

'Stay absolutely still,' she cried across the room, 'there's a centipede on the table

beside you!’

Even as she spoke Merlin was on her feet and making a dash for the food trolley which stood near the door. She snatched up a silver dish-cover, moved swiftly to Paul’s chair and slammed the cover down over that black and scarlet, venomous horror.

‘And now what?’ he drawled. ‘I gather you have trapped it?’

‘God—yes.’ She was staring down at the silver lid under which that thing was shifting about on its many legs. towards your hand.’

‘Don’t get into a lather now you have it trapped,’ he said. ‘Go fetch the bottle of cognac—yes, I said the cognac. You’ll recall that we had some after our lunchtime coffee.’

‘I—I’m not about to faint, *mynheer*!’

‘Am I suggesting that you are, *mevrouw*? Kerosene would be a little more efficient, but that cognac is strong stuff and when you have brought the bottle over here you will douse the centipede and burn it. You heard me! It can’t be allowed to escape, now can it?’

‘No, *mynheer*.’ Now she did feel a trifle faint and had to pull herself together as she went across to the cabinet for the brandy and returned across matting that seemed to be shaking under her feet. She had to do what he told her—he couldn’t see to do it, and that beastly thing had to be disposed of.

‘Don’t set fire to yourself,’ Paul said warningly. ‘Drench it in the spirit and then set a match to it—are you sure you can manage? Remember the thing is venomous and its sting can kill.’

‘I know,’ she shuddered again as she thought of how close it had crawled towards him, attracted by the warmth of his skin. ‘Couldn’t I crush it with some thing?’

‘You haven’t enough muscle, and I haven’t the eyesight. What was it you slammed down over it?’

‘A food cover—oh, where are the matches?’

‘By the lamps—have you got them?’

‘Yes— *mynheer*, did you light these lamps with matches?’ She gave him a look of horror.

‘Of course!’ He spoke impatiently. ‘Now lift off that lid very carefully, toss on the brandy as if dousing a plum pudding and then be quick with the match, only don’t set light to yourself!’

‘You could do that, lighting lamps with matches!’

‘What else would I use, an incantation? Now get set— you have the cork out of the bottle?’

It popped as she drew it. ‘*Mynheer*, do you mind going over to the other side of the room? It might get on you —the centipede, I mean. Please?’

‘I’ll stand just here.’ He rose from his chair and moved round to her side, tilting his head in that listening attitude as the brandy gurgled out over insect, table, matting and parts of Merlin’s silk skirt. The large insect, released, scurried in a circle, then halted as if dazed by the strong spirit. In that instant Merlin struck a match and dropped it flaming on to the soaking wet centipede, which in an instant was aflame and crackling.

'Slam that cover back on,' Paul ordered, and with a shaking hand she obeyed him, and was glad not to witness any more of the incineration.

'Good,' he approved, 'and now take several deep breaths and you won't be sick.'

'Y-you can be quite ruthless, can't you?' She swallowed and the nausea ebbed away. 'I shall have nightmares about that.'

'Console your soft heart with the thought that it had to be done, but for a few minutes it took your mind off the typhoon, eh?'

She gazed up at him, rubbing at the same time at her brandy-dampened skirt.

'Shall I leave the remains where they are, or will it be all right if I take them to the kitchen and wash them away? I could make a pot of tea?'

'I don't know.' He stood there, eyes narrowed, listening with hyper-acute ears to what was going on outside the comparative safety of this room. 'Get a table napkin and wrap the corpse in that and hide it somewhere. We'll have that champagne, I think. It will be good for both of us.'

'As you say, *mynheer*.' She wasn't going to argue with him, and with the aid of a napkin she swept the remains of the centipede from the table and quickly folded it up, taking it to the trolley and placing it with the remains from their lunch.

'The little table has been scorched,' she told him.

'But for you my hand would have been stung.' A smile edged his lips, but his eyes were serious. 'My grateful thanks for your quick eyes and your level head.

Some women would have had hysterics.'

'I'm not that sort—oh, it's such a pity that we can't have tea. I do fancy a cup!'

'The typical Englishwoman. Always tea in a moment of crisis, eh? But bang wine is much more glamorous, and we have to celebrate the fact that you probably saved my life. I shouldn't much care to go that way.'

'I shouldn't much care to see you go—that way,' she said, colour rising into her cheeks. 'Shall I bring you the champagne?'

'If you will, and the wine glasses.' He seemed to watch her, gauging her movements from the silky ripples of her skirt. 'To have conquered a crisis is always exciting, and now you and I, *mevrouw*, will get ourselves just a little on the wrong side of sobriety.'

'Tipsy, you mean?' She came to him with the long-necked bottle and the pair of stemmed glasses, loving his tallness as she stood near him, her eyes upon his hands as he stripped the foil from the bottle and took leverage on the cork. It moved under the long, strong fingers and came out with a hiss, the pale gold wine bubbling over his skin.

'You will have to pour,' he said, handing her the bottle. 'Generous measures for both of us, do you understand?'

'I think so.' In that moment a sudden disturbing stillness had fallen over the house. The lamps burned with a matching stillness and overhead the fans creaked almost loudly. Merlin poured the champagne and placed Paul's glass in his hand; he thanked her softly and his features were as if moulded in bronze, with not a flicker of a muscle, not a movement of an eyelash as he listened to the silence. She could feel him listening with his entire body, and

she took quick nervous sips of her wine. She knew that every one of Paul's senses was attuned to what was happening out there in the darkness—waiting, like a beast with claws extended towards them.

'Merlin,' never before had he called her by her first name, 'there is an alcove in this room, but I can't quite recall its direction. You will take hold of my hand and lead me into it, and then you will place cushions on the floor, and there we will drink our bang wine and think only of the good times we have had in our lives.

Maybe not too many, but enough, eh?'

'The eye?' she breathed, clasping his fingers with her left hand.

'Yes, right above us, Cyclops watching, deciding what to do with the island. It isn't terribly big and if the eye descends, then it will sweep Pulau-Indah back into the ocean.'

'Oh, God! All those people—those children!'

'Yes, but try not to think about them, though I know that is asking a lot of you. The alcove will provide some moments of shelter for us, so lead me there.'

'I'm glad,' her fingers tightened on his, 'that I didn't leave you to face this alone. I'm glad I'm with you!'

'You are talking like a romantic girl,' he crisped. 'What can a blind man do for you? I am in your hands!'

She took him into the alcove at the far end of the room, gulped a little more champagne, then collected all the cushions and piled them on the floor.

'Now bring the bottle,' he said. 'It would be a pity to waste such an excellent wine.'

They settled themselves among the cushions and after her second glass of champagne Merlin gave a sudden giggle. 'It's crazy, *mynheer*, a pair of grown-up people lolling about like tipsy teenagers at a Hallowe'en party. When do you reckon the poltergeist will start throwing the furniture about?'

'Soon, or not at all. Suspense has a frightening yet fascinating quality to it.'

There he broke off, for in that moment the wind woke up again, rising to a sudden shriek like something demented. 'Quick, get rid of those glasses and the bottle—get them out of the alcove in case they break!'

Heart pounding, head spinning, Merlin obeyed him, and then found herself flying back to where he waited, unthinking that it was strange that his arms should be held open, waiting for her to dive into them. They closed hard about her and she was drawn inexorably close to him ... well, if this was to be the end of everything, then she wanted it to end in his arms, pulled close against his hard chest, allowing herself the luxury of melting against his heart, no longer concerned that he might realise from the feel of her that she was far younger than the sedate woman she made out to be.

She felt the cushions beneath her spine as Paul laid himself over her in a shielding, muscular arc. 'No moment, Miss Lakeside, for the usual proprieties,' he murmured. 'I'm not crushing you?'

'No—' Her voice was faint, half-lost in her throat, and she let her arms close around him. Sweet heaven, this was actually real, it was happening, she was lost in Paul's arms,

locked close to someone so dear to her heart there were no words to describe the feeling.

Then the conflicting winds struck the house and it seemed to lift from its foundations, and Paul held every bit of her to every bone and sinew of his body, his face pressed into her hair, his long legs wrapped around her, his elbow fixed into position so he wouldn't quite suffocate her with his large frame. The house rocked and they were locked together in that rhythm ... like lovers, she thought wildly. Like a pair of pagans who flung themselves tightly together to be destroyed. The wind and the fear and the love all mingled in her head as the storm built to a crescendo and clashed around them, hurling trees right across the compound, wrenching shutters off their hinges, and tearing great chunks of thatching out of the roof.

That nightmare pounding would never end, Merlin told herself, and if it ended she and Paul would be swept like this into the velocity of the storm, and then probably torn apart.

That she couldn't bear, and with fierce arms she clung to him, a limpet, she promised herself, who wouldn't let go but who would fly straight with him through dark space into deep silent peace ...

'Are you taking a nap down there?' His voice grated right in her ear, and with an effort she forced open her eyes and saw his face directly above her. An hour could have passed, or an eternity, but buried in Paul's arms she had not resisted the hypnotic roar deep inside her head and had fallen into a kind of trance, waiting for what must happen.

Had it happened, for an uncanny silence seemed to hang in the air?

And then she felt herself coming back to earth as Paul began to loosen his arms from around her, to lift himself away from her, uncoiling his legs and releasing her to a sudden feeling of emptiness and chill.

'The typhoon passed over us,' he said. 'Right over us. There has been a great deal of damage, I would think, for a typhoon moves like the rotors of a big cutting machine. But once it passes it continues on its way and I believe we are now—safe and out of danger.'

Merlin lay there on the crushed cushions absorbing his words; her hair was tousled madly about her face and neck, and never again would she be free of the sensation of Paul moving his face in her hair as if he liked the feel and scent of it, his heartbeats kicking her through the silk of her shirt, the warmth and hardness of him pressed to every portion of her body.

Now he was on his feet and thrusting the tousled hair back from his eyes, but on his face there was a look that dismayed Merlin; a sternly thoughtful look as if he were brooding upon something unconnected with the storm itself.

'Thank goodness that screaming wind has died away!' Merlin gathered herself together and assumed a brisk tone of voice. She pulled her skirt into some kind of order and tidied her own hair with a slightly unsteady hand. It wasn't easy trying to get back to normality after the experience they had gone through. The trauma and the excitement still lingered, and though she knew that Paul's impulse to protect her had been entirely impersonal, the action of a man who would have sheltered in his arms any woman caught in

such a perilous situation with him, there had been a magic to it that still ran like quicksilver through Merlin's veins.

'Oh, it's good to be alive, but it was a close call, wasn't it, *mynheer*?' She could betray her inmost feelings if she wasn't careful and a deep breath steadied her. Once more they had to be employer and secretary, and all other longings and emotions had to be kept under severe control. The intimacy of close physical contact with Paul had to be looked upon as no more than a necessity of the moment, and the fact had to be faced that it would never happen again. Only very unusual circumstances had made it possible for her to experience his embrace ... but it had been marvellous despite the danger and the very real threat to their lives. -A fragment of a dream come true, and she must now accept the realisation that she was unlikely to ever feel again the power and warmth and helpless joy of letting him hold her while the earth rocked.

'It was a very strange experience,' he said, almost sombrely. 'I felt that something lifted us, then set us down again. What of you?'

'I just held on to you for all I was worth—all I wanted was not to be swept away on my own.' Merlin forced a laugh. 'I've probably left fingernail marks in your back.'

'Then let us hope that the boy who acts as my valet doesn't happen to notice them.' A very odd note had come into Paul's voice and Merlin gave him a searching look. 'Nail stabbings might condemn me, eh?'

'Condemn you—but why?' Her gold-flecked eyes were fixed upon his face and a pulse beat with sudden madness under the skin of her throat.

'Passion marks, Miss Lakeside.' He drawled the words almost with insolence.

'Come, don't tell me you are innocently unaware that lovers sometimes bite and claw each other as they embrace? I think if a man's distrust of a woman was as intense as his desire for her, he might feel driven to inflict pain on her slim, white, tantalising body. A man who is blind has to take a lot on trust, and he wouldn't really know an angel from a devil.'

As he spoke he seemed to gaze with deadly intention at Merlin, and she felt a sensation of unsteadiness and had to clutch at the wall. What was he doing, letting her know that he had felt her nubility in his arms and was going to be subtle, even cruel before demanding an explanation?

'Have I shocked you?' he asked, still in that insolent tone of voice. 'A woman of your age, who has had nursing experience?'

Merlin's heart gave a lurch ... a different kind of storm was gathering and she was alone at the centre of it, but he wasn't yet ready to let it break; abruptly he turned his back on her.

'We've spent enough hours in this room,' he said curtly. 'I, for one, would like nothing better than a stinging cold shower.'

He made his way towards the door, using an outflung hand to guide him. He found the bolt and slid it open. He flung wide the door as if he couldn't wait to get away from her. Merlin felt a doomed woman ... close like that in his arms she had been brailled by his senses; he had felt the softness of her hair against his skin, the slim suppleness of her body, the shy,

wild fear that had shaken her even though she loved and adored him ... she was still a virgin and she hadn't known how potent the male body could feel in such close contact.

'I—I could cook us a hot meal,' she said hesitantly. 'If you would like that, *mynheer*?'

'As you please.' He flung the words over his shoulder. 'Don't go outside the house, for we shan't know until daylight what sort of damage has been caused. It will be dark as hell and there could have been a certain amount of flooding and the rain is still falling, though not so violently as before.'

'I do hope all those people in the tea valley are all right.'

'Lon will take care of them and ensure that they remain sheltered in the long sheds where the tea is packed and stored. They will have food and bedding with them, and it will be a freakish trick of the devil's if the storm wheels in this direction again.'

'Then you think the island is now safe?'

'Let us hope so.' He walked away along the corridor, and Merlin sagged against the wall with a weary sigh that was almost a sob. She had wanted the sanctuary of Paul's arms so much that she had flung caution to those stormy winds ... now he realised that she had been deceiving him all these weeks and he was justifiably angry with her. He would demand to know what sort of a game she was playing with him, and she dreaded the moment when he sprang his demand and she had to try and conciliate him without arousing the suspicions that could never be far away from his nerve ends.

A nurse had been responsible for his blindness ... and only minutes ago he had spoken of her nursing experience in a voice as coldly cruel as the *parang*, the axe-bladed cutlass the islanders used for chopping the great hands of bananas and the hard stalks of sugar-cane that grew high in the plantation fields.

What would those fields look like in the morning? The wind and rain would have scythed the sugar-cane and flung it into the mud; the crops would be ruined along with many of the tea-bushes. Perhaps in having to deal with all that Paul would forget ... no, Merlin shook her head in a gesture of despair. It was too much to hope for that he would allow the deception to go on that she was a woman double her own age.

She glanced drearily around the room which for a while had seemed such a haven. Now it looked like a smoky den, with cushions sprawled untidily on the floor, champagne spilled across the matting, and a trolley of unwashed dishes by the door. Merlin set about tidying up, then she wheeled the trolley to the kitchen, where a shutter had been entirely wrenched off, the window broken and a great puddle of water let in. Uncaring of the rainwater, Merlin stood by the window and gazed out upon the dark, drizzly night where the stars seemed to have gone into hiding. A low-pitched wind moaned in the palm trees and the air that blew in upon her was chilly and damp. She gave a shiver as from the jungle there came the growl of an animal who had ventured from its lair now the storm had passed ... a tiger, probably hungry and seeking its supper.

She had better start that supper Paul had been promised and going over to the ice-box, which like the stove and the hotwater system was run on kerosene, she scanned its interior to see if there was any steak available. If so she would braise and garnish it with

onion and herbs, bake some succulent sweet potatoes and sliced courgettes, and add a hot rich gravy. To start with he could have some smoked ham with egg mayonnaise, and to finish with she would make hot jam pancakes. Such a meal would make a change for him; the cook was Indonesian and inclined to favour the spicy foods of the island. Paul never seemed to mind, but it sometimes occurred to Merlin that he must get a little homesick for a more civilised cuisine, and back home in England she had filled in a number of her lonely evenings by taking a course in cookery. She had enjoyed those lessons and had proved a good pupil, and right now was determined to soothe Paul's angry feelings by serving him such a delicious meal that he wouldn't have the heart to chastise her tonight.

Merlin couldn't have endured it, not after the racking experience of the typhoon, and tying an apron over her long skirt she started supper, moving about the damp and chilly kitchen with a brisk determination to make the best of a fraught situation, garnishing the meat and placing it in the oven, peeling potatoes and slicing courgettes, whipping the pancake mixture and placing a dampened square of muslin over the bowl.

This wasn't the first time she had faced torturous suspense, and nothing could ever be worse than waiting to hear if Paul van Setan had lost his eyesight. She had wept uncontrollably, beating her hands against the tiled wall of the toilet until they ached and bled. Nothing could ever beat that, and she still had some hope that Paul would let her stay on as his secretary ... the fear she tried not to face was that he might guess her true identity. God pity her if that happened!

Merlin was so absorbed in her cookery that she didn't hear Paul come to the door, nor was she aware of him until she happened to turn to the dresser for a plate. It nearly slipped out of her hand, for he was standing there very upright and still, and he was obviously listening to her every movement. He wore a white turtle-necked sweater over dark trousers, and his hair was still damp from his shower and severely combed except for a strand near his left eyebrow, jaggling against his brown skin.

'Are you walking about in water?' he asked suddenly.

'What?' Her fingers clenched the plate and she glanced down at her feet.

Her oriental slippers were soaked, as were her stockings and the hem of her skirt. She was surprised, for she hadn't noticed that the puddle of rain had spread right across to the kitchen table. 'Why —yes. It must have come in through the broken window.'

'Broken!' he exclaimed. 'I could feel night air, but I thought you had opened the shutters. Is there much damage in here?'

'No, just the shutter, which has been wrenched from its hinges, and the broken pane of glass where a tree branch has come through.'

'I must do something about that, *meisje*. You cannot work in here in the wetness and the cold air, apart from which anything could come in from the forest. Could you get a broom and sweep aside the glass? Then I can see about fixing the shutter.'

'I—I have supper in the oven and I must see to it—I don't mind about the window.' Merlin bit her lip, sharply, for it hadn't escaped her notice that he had called her a girl in Dutch. So he was paving the way for a showdown! She felt her throat tighten with fear, and

wildly wished that she had the nerve to throw herself in his arms, to seduce him with her body, do anything rather than be again the tonguetied little fool who took all the blame. Instinct told her why his anger with her was extra sharp ... there in his arms during the storm he had been as potently aware of her as a female as she had been of him as a male. She could appeal to that side of him right now, if only she dared. Other women would do it rather than face total rejection ... but nature had made Merlin shy and reserved, the sort to take punishment without pleading ... and she was in the wrong. She had come to him in the guise of deception and nothing could alter the fact that it would shame her rather than delight her to make Paul surrender to bodily hunger. He would dislike her all the more for that; he would be able to say she was cheap as well as a liar.

‘What are you trying to do,’ he snarled, ‘catch your death of cold?’ He came forward into the kitchen and pieces of glass crunched beneath his shoes; the next instant he struck his body against the corner of the table and cursed it.

‘Please, I’ll sweep away the glass and help you with the shutter—just stand there for a moment.’

‘Yes, like some damned blighted log while a bit of a girl clears up the mess!’

Why the hell did you come to Pulau-Indah? Who wants your sort here?’

The tears sprang into her eyes and dropped down her face as she moved the broom about the floor, sweeping bits of wet glass into a corner out of his way. She had no defence against his anger and that was why she didn’t try to answer him.

‘Lost the tongue that’s been so agile up to now?’ he demanded. ‘All right, Miss Lakeside— or should I say fake? lead the blind fool to where the shutter is and I shall try, in my clumsy way, to adjust it so the snakes and tarantulas don’t crawl in while you are playing at being domestic.’

Merlin gave him a hurt look and didn’t remind him she had managed to cope when a centipede had got into the house. Her hand was like ice as she took hold of his and guided him to where the heavy teak shutter lay lop-sidely against the wall, its hinges hanging loose.

‘Idiotic little fool,’ he growled. ‘Your hand feels frozen —and let me warn you that if you go down with a chill and it turns to a fever you’ll be quite ill in this kind of climate. Your metabolism is English, and this place is tropical and there are all kinds of bugs in the atmosphere, waiting to attack a sick person.’

‘Then that ought to please you,’ she shot back at him. ‘You obviously want to punish me and that should do it, courtesy of the bugs without your hand being involved. Shall I help lift the shutter?’

‘You will stand clear! You would only manage to drop it on your feet, which are probably soaking wet, and it’s my eyes, Miss Lakeside, not my arms that are useless!’ He hoisted the great shutter without any effort and managed to force it into the frame of the window, giving the hinges a thump with his fist so the screws locked back into their holes. ‘That should hold until the morning, I think, unless the wind gets up again. What are you cooking? It smells good.’

‘As long as you don’t think I’m brewing some witches’ potion to poison you with.’ As

she bent to the oven to take a look at the braised steak and onions, Merlin could feel the dried tears on her face, and the nerve that flicked at her lip.

'I've learned,' he drawled, 'to beware of witches and their potions—they aren't always as innocuous as they look, and I am now in the position of having to trust to my sense of smell. So as well as being a proficient secretary, you are also an efficient cook. Shall I never cease to discover what a jewel you are—and what an outlandish little liar!'

'I—I hope you won't let it spoil your appetite, *mynheer*, now you've uncovered my—my little deception. I meant no harm.'

'Harm?' he exploded. 'You are either ineffably innocent, or the most brazen, sweet-voiced hussy it has ever been my misfortune—let me tell you this, Miss Lakeside, we shall eat that supper because it smells too damn good to resist, but afterwards you and I are going to have a little talk and you are going to explain this charade which you have been enjoying at my expense. But before dishing up the food, you will go upstairs and get a change of footwear. Fool girl! Sloshing about in puddles! Perhaps you are a natural innocent? Are you, I wonder?'

Merlin's eyes raced over his face, seeking a softening in the bronze hardness of his features, but he turned away and left her in a state of nervous doubt and fear. 'I will go and check out the salon,' he said. 'If there's no damage we can take supper there—and have that talk.'

As his footsteps died away, Merlin pressed shaky hands over her face. She was going to face another inquisition, and like that one in London it was going to be hell.

CHAPTER SIX

THERE was no way to forget how she had stood white-faced and stunned before the hospital committee, with no defence against the harsh accusation that because of her neglect of her proper duties a man had been cruelly blinded. She would, they said, have faced a term of imprisonment had Paul van Setan laid criminal charges against her.

Why had Paul not done so when he admitted to a bitter hatred of the person whom he believed was responsible for his loss of sight? Had he some other, more torturous punishment in store for *her* ... the one they had blamed, and who had blamed herself for not checking that the eye lotion was the innocuous one he always used. But why should she even suspect that anything was wrong with it when she always took such care that the drugs in the surgery cabinet were always in order and clearly marked as to their contents? A mistake just couldn't happen ... unless it was intentional!

Merlin could never forget the other nurse in surgery that day ... petite and shapely, with hair smooth as brown silk under the theatre cap, a slight sultriness to her full lips. Was it remotely possible that she had some reason for injuring Paul? Oh no, it was too ghastly to even think about—no woman would do such a thing, and a nurse would know in advance how much pain and damage would be inflicted.

Paul van Setan, tall, distinguished, and desirable to most of the female staff, except those who were so dedicated that they actually preferred a sick person to a man in the prime of his career.

A career that was shot to pieces ... and she, an ex-nurse in her early twenties, was facing a dreaded confrontation with the man who had every justification to want revenge on a nurse! Merlin felt as if only a thin remnant of a veil remained to be torn away from her cowering body, and there was no escape from that revelation; no place to hide, with only the dark forest beyond the house, where the tigers prowled.

Here inside the house another sort of tiger was waiting to unsheath his claws and his terrible anger; he'd be merciless if he had guessed her identity, and Merlin glanced about her like a trapped creature, and her legs felt as if they wouldn't support her as she made her way upstairs for a change of clothing, her hand gripping the handrail every step of the way. Once inside her room she had to hasten into the bathroom for a drink of cold water. A faintness had come over her, making her lean against the wash-basin with eyes closed and a tight, choked feeling as if unable to get air into her lungs. Paul knew who she was! He knew and was going to make her suffer for it! Oh God, it wasn't pain or even humiliation that made her shrink, it was being hated and scorned by a man who meant everything to her. She even wanted to die rather than face the ordeal of that interview ... heaven help her, why hadn't she resisted his arms at the height of the storm! It was that need to be held and protected while the typhoon raged which had given away the secret even his loyal houseboys had kept from him.

As the faintness ebbed away Merlin splashed her face with cold water and pulled herself together. Paul had said she wasn't a coward, but right now her courage was in rags ...

he scared her more than the storm which seemed as if it had gone on its turbulent way, leaving a residue of rain and quietly moaning wind.

Merlin slipped out of her damp skirt and crumpled shirt, unpeeled her tights and towelled her feet until they felt a little warmer. There in her bedroom she debated what to wear and put on the kimono embroidered with persimmons, its sleeves like big dragonfly wings. Her hair was combed back smoothly and clipped, and the mirror showed her a pale, apprehensive face, with eyes that looked enormous and almost dark because her pupils were so enlarged. With a weariness of body and spirit Merlin pushed her feet into flat-heeled slippers and took a handkerchief from the drawer of the dressing-table.

Paul would be waiting for her in the salon, and there they would eat supper like a gaoler with the condemned prisoner. There was no way to avoid that confrontation and if she didn't go down to him, he would come up here to her.

Merlin slowly turned to her big carved bed, with its silk coverlet to the floor and the netting looped back in bamboo rings. What if she did wait here ... what if he came and she used her body to try and appease his anger? Other women did such things. Like Eve they tempted Adam and kept the devil at bay.

Yet even as she contemplated curling up on her bed and waiting for Paul to come to her room, Merlin was moving towards the door as if obeying a deep instinct of pride, and possibly the need to be punished for the part she had played in his ruined life. Kimono-clad, her head held high as if carrying it to the block, Merlin made her way downstairs and walked to the door of the salon. It stood partly open and Paul was inside, his back to her, and in front of him a beautiful hand-painted screen with bluebirds flying wing to wing towards the turrets of a castle in the clouds. The birds and the castle were created in a crusted style of embroidery so they stood away from the silk of the screen, and Merlin realised at once that Paul had been brailling the scene with his sensitive fingertips, feeling the flight of those lovebirds, the oriental symbol of felicity.

'I—I'm just about to bring in supper,' she said. 'This room seems all right.'

'Yes,' he swung round, 'it isn't too bad. Again there was a smashed window, but I've placed this screen in front of it. Have you changed into dry slippers?'

'Yes, *mynheer*.' Merlin felt pinned by the grey steel of his eyes, like knives flying blindly through the air towards her. 'Ill fetch the food.'

She almost ran to the kitchen, pursued by what he must be thinking about her, and dished up the food with hands that kept dropping things. She felt convinced she would drop the tray on the way to the salon, but fortunately this didn't happen and the laden tray was placed on a glossy black table set in front of a low leather couch with great curved arms. Imari shaded lamps were softly alight, standing on a black and gold lacquer cabinet. Jade-blue temple jars and a lovely oriental carpet added colour to the room.

Head bent, heart scared, Merlin arranged Paul's plate and cutlery, then set her own at the far end of the table. When the food covers were lifted a delectable aroma filled the salon. 'Supper is ready, *mynheer*.' Her voice was low-pitched in an attempt to stop it from shaking. 'I—I thought you might appreciate an English type meal for a change.'

Directed by the sound of her voice, he came across the room and instinctively Merlin extended a hand and caught at his wrist. 'I thought just here.' She drew him to the couch where the table was set. 'Your plate is ready if you'd like me to arrange your meat and vegetables?'

'Do go ahead, from the smell of that food you really do know how to cook.' He sat down and waited while she laid his plate so he would have no trouble finding what he wanted. The rich, dark gravy was poured over the steak and in the silence between them the rustle of her silk sleeves could be plainly heard.

'This time you are dressed as a *geisha*, eh?' He broke a roll with a crisp little snap, and it was only then that Merlin realised she had forgotten to start the meal with the ham and egg mayonnaise; she was about to tell him when he sliced into his steak and carried the portion to his mouth. As he ate he half-closed his eyes with appreciation and a ray of little lines showed beside them.

'Excellent,' he murmured. 'I could almost imagine myself at the Ritz grill, except that I'd be served by a waiter instead of a girl in a kimono. Do you know anything at all about the *geisha*?'

'Not very much.' Merlin served herself with about half of what she had given Paul; she had very little appetite and could have forgone supper, except that he would insist she eat something.

'The *geisha* is trained to the fingertips to serve a man with whatever he desires in the way of food and drink, music and dancing. She is the epitome of all the graces, pretty as a doll, and never quite real. The man who wishes to enjoy her company must never expect her or himself to overstep the bounds of politeness and tradition. She is not a woman, you see, but is the shape of a man's ideal dream—but dreams can be rather sterile, when all is said and done, so you will have to forgive me, Miss Lakeside, if I stop thinking of you as my *geisha*.'

There he paused and glanced up, the light of the lamps catching in his blind eyes. 'Now do stop hovering and enjoy what you have so deliciously cooked up.'

That there was a double meaning in his words Merlin didn't doubt, and she sat down on the couch as far from him as possible, and pecked at her supper. She had to eat a few mouthfuls, for she couldn't risk coming over faint again. He would only presume it to be an act, and Merlin had made up her mind to take what was coming, and as with that other storm there was in the atmosphere of the salon a gathering tension; the pauses between Paul's remarks grew longer and the silences played on Merlin's emotions.

He laid down his knife and fork, wiped his mouth with a napkin, then lounged against the leather of the couch.

'Will you have dessert?' Merlin asked.

His eyes focused on her face and she drew back against the couch arm, as if he could actually see the fright on her face. 'I don't think I'm in the mood for anything sweet,' he said deliberately. 'And from the way you have been playing about with your supper—for heaven's sake stop pretending to eat. I'm tired of your games!'

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Spare me the humility.’ His eyes glittered stone-grey, with a cold glow of revenge beginning to light them. ‘Putting on that kimono hasn’t turned you into the epitome of all the virtues—now what are you fiddling about with?’

‘I’m clearing the dishes so I can take them to the kitchen. You’ll want coffee, or perhaps tea?’ Merlin was shivering a little ... she wanted to get away from the storm light that was gathering in his eyes, if only for a short while.

‘Coffee or tea can wait,’ he said curtly. ‘Put the tray on one side and then come back here—I’m warning you, *meisje*, you take one step out of this room and I shall be after you, and don’t imagine you could evade me. The moment I fell over something you would be there to administer your cool and sympathetic touch—one of the requirements of being a nurse, eh? I just can’t understand how you came to give it up. I should think you were just the type for self-sacrifice, so long as it gets you what you want!’

‘I don’t know what you mean by that?’ Merlin stood with the tray jingling in her unsteady hands.

‘The devil you don’t! And do put that tray of dishes down before the lot finds itself on the floor!’

She obeyed the order, and the reiteration that she return and sit on the couch. On its very edge, as if poised for flight should his anger become physical. ‘I—I don’t know what you mean,’ she said again. ‘I’m not out for anything a-and that’s the truth.’

‘I don’t think you know the meaning of the word, young woman. And you are a very young woman, are you not? In which case I’ll have it explained, if you don’t mind, why you have been passing yourself off as a middle-aged one!’

‘So I could keep my job—you’d have sent me away.’

‘Would I really?’

‘You know you would.’

‘Was it, then, such a remarkably wonderful job, *meisje*? But I suppose it was, in your view, as I could be taken so thoroughly for a blind fool. It must have given you many an amusing moment to see how thoroughly I was taken in, but no wonder you would never allow me to Braille your face, let alone your form.

We’ll remedy that omission right now, for I have a need to know what you are like.’

‘No,’ the word broke from her and she half rose from the couch.

‘Sit down,’ he ordered, ‘and not miles away from me, but here, by me.’ He rapped the leather and Merlin gave him a petrified look. Then she flung a look at the door and estimated that she could reach it before he could ever catch her ... the next instant shock vibrated all through her, for with his acute senses he had guessed what she might do and he had reached out a long arm and had hold of her before she could jump to her feet. His clasp was uncaringly hurtful as he jerked her to where he sat and forced her down beside him; there he held her with one hand while his other found her face and almost roughly traced its contours, feeling across her temple, pausing where the tiny mole was set beside her left eye, then moving down the slender line of her cheek to her mouth. His fingertip traced the line

of her lips, then moved to her shoulder, the side of her neck, where it suddenly wrapped steely fingers around that slim column.

‘What big eyes you have, little one, and a beauty mark to set them off.’

‘You’re being abominably cruel,’ she gasped. Why?’

‘Oh, don’t you think I’m justified?’

She stared into his blind eyes and her heart was a hammer beating under her breast. Oh God, did he know that her hand had held the eye-cup ... could he be remembering her in her blue nursing cape with the little chain across her throat, a small starched cap on her neatly restrained hair? His hand was around her throat right now and his thumb was against the pulse that beat there so madly.

‘Why are you so terrified?’ he drawled.

‘Because you’re being so—pitiless. I really meant you no harm.’

‘So you said before, and if I’ve become a stranger to pity where women are concerned, can you really blame me?’

He knew, thundered her heart. He had guessed, and was playing some terrible game of tiger and prey. Instinctively she sought to escape his hold on her, and instantly his other arm was around her and there was a sensual savagery to his smile as he pulled her to his chest. ‘Yes, this was how it was during the storm, eh? There are certain things that can’t be held back—the tide and the darkness, the roar of the storm, and the passion of a man.’

By passion she thought he meant uncontrollable anger, and she gave a little moan and tried again to pull away from him. ‘Stop that,’ he said, ‘and tell me a little more about yourself. Your hair, what sort of colour is it?’

‘M-my hair?’

‘Yes, this, like silk when I touch it, damn you!’

‘It’s a sort of—of brown, with streaks of gold, like a tortoiseshell cat.’

‘Really, and what about your eyes? They match your hair in colour?’

‘Yes, brown with flecks of a paler colour—amber, I suppose you would call it.’

‘Gold, and brown, like peridots, eh? More and more interesting.’

‘Oh, nothing so fanciful!’

‘How modest you are, for a girl who sounds as if she might be unusually attractive. Why the devil did you need to come to Pulau-Indah? Are the men of England even more blind than I am?’

‘I’m nothing out of the ordinary, and I wanted to travel—I told you. I—I wanted to stay here and you’d have sent me away had you known—I’m good at my work, you can’t deny that.’

‘I don’t deny it, but in playing your charade, you little fool, you must now have every adult on this island assuming you are my *nyai*, my *kasih pada*, whom I take to bed. Do I make myself crystal clear? The islanders are a simple people and they don’t complicate their sensual relationships. You live here under my roof, and you are a single girl, a *nona*, and I am a man—do you fondly suppose that a blind man hasn’t the normal feelings of other men and goes around with everything switched off, as the lights and the moon and the smiles of

people are turned off for him? These people know me, and they would find it hard to believe that I had slept in this house without taking you to bed. Now has the penny dropped? Now have you got the ticket?’

Oh yes, the penny had dropped with a clang to the very bottom of her stomach, and she suddenly blushed uncontrollably, feeling as if her skin was on fire.

His *nyai*, his mistress, who pretended during the day that she was a plain and frigid spinster, but who at night let him come to her bed and make love to her.

‘But we know, you and I,’ she gasped, ‘that you’ve never —touched me. Oh, I never dreamed it was that—that you were so angry because of what people were thinking.’

‘Then what did you imagine was wrong with me?’

Her head spun and she felt faint with relief ... so that was it, a matter of propriety, and it was said that Dutch people were a very moral people. ‘Oh, does it matter?’ she asked. ‘So long as I can be your secretary.’

‘Do you honestly imagine that we can carry on as before, that I can have you under my roof and pretend to myself that you are a mature and unromantic woman, play-acting as the puritan spinster, shelved by men, and more interested in caressing the piano? That persona no longer has any relevance as far as I’m concerned ... what kind of a stick do you take me for?’

‘I’ve never taken you for a stick, *mynheer*.’ Her heart had sunk ... he meant to send her away, and it would be like wrenching out her very roots from their entanglement with Paul’s being. He had never had to make love to her to make her part of him, and now that it seemed safe to assume that he was unaware of her connection with his blindness, she wanted to fight to stay here.

‘Please, don’t send me away. I have nothing much to go back to, and I’ve grown to like this island so much.’

‘I have no intention of sending you away.’

‘What?’ Merlin couldn’t believe her ears. ‘But you just said.’

‘I said that things could not resume as they were. The charade is over and now you are going to have to face the consequences of playing such a game with an adult male.’ His hand slid down her spine, finding her hair and twining it around his fist. ‘Hair to your shoulders and eyes speckled like the turtle-shell, why should I not want you?’

Merlin’s heart seemed to turn over and she couldn’t believe that she had heard him say he *wanted* her.

‘I want you!’ Now he said it almost harshly. ‘Do I make myself clear? I *want you*. I’m sick and tired of stumbling around alone, my days like night and my nights as lonely as hell. I had you in my arms during the storm’s rage, and I felt a sudden storm raging in me, sweeping away the arguments with myself that I could only be a burden on a woman, drowning out the restraints I’ve imposed on myself because I shrank from being a mere object of pity to anyone. Yes, I want your silky hair against my skin, your mouth on mine blotting out the loneliness, your slim shape close to me, alive and young and warm, so I’ll know I’m still alive and not buried in some black hole in the ground!’

'Oh, don't—don't!' Merlin sank her face against him and shuddered.

'Mustn't I speak of such things?'

'It's awful to hear you speak of—death.'

'There are times when blindness is awfully like it, in the depths of night, reaching out to nothing but blackness. I can't take any more of that. I want to feel a woman in my arms, tight and close in the dark, softly moaning as I— love you.'

'But you don't love me.' Merlin hadn't meant to say it, but at heart she was a romantic and it wasn't *her* that he wanted, just someone to be there making the night a little easier for him to get through.

'In the name of heaven, what has that sentimental nonsense to do with us?' He spoke impatiently. 'When a girl decides that she has no more use for the big city and prefers to live on an island where life is half a century behind the times, then she is either running away from something, or is genuinely in search of the simple, basic, even primitive ways that have gone out of fashion in the modern world. If that is the case, and you wish to stay on this island, then you have only one means of doing so— by becoming my wife.'

His wife? Paul's ... wife!

When she sat there speechless in the crook of his arm, he broke into a cynical smile. 'I realise that the idea of marrying a blind man is hardly an appealing one, but I have never had much time for irregular arrangements, unlike my cousin Hendrik. I don't imagine I would have married in the normal course of events, but you seem to have more patience than most with my kind of stumbling around, and as you so rightly said, celibacy has few rewards for the man or woman of normal feelings, and I haven't lost my other faculties even if my eyes are useless. I have sufficient money for the two of us. I can afford you.'

Merlin winced ... he said that as if she were something he thought of buying. A toy for his pleasure!

Even so she felt elated by his proposal of marriage; she could even bear it that he had called love a lot of sentimental nonsense. It wasn't love that he wished her to share, but the blackness of his nights when he might switch on a lamp just to know it was on and smoke a cheroot in the silence and loneliness of his bedroom.

She couldn't deny him. She had too much warmth of heart, too much regret for her part in his tragedy, too much yearning to be part of him in whatever capacity he needed her.

'Are you never going to speak?' he asked. 'Is silence your way of refusing me? Come, if you create suspense, you have to relieve it, or drive a man up the wall.'

Merlin moved in his arms with a whisper of silk and her face raised to him offered eyes and lips and the promise of passion that would reassure him that the darkness was alive and not part of the grave. 'I'm willing to be your wife, *mynheer*.'

Then, though he had demanded an answer, he seemed the one struck into silence. For moments on end the suspense was Merlin's, and then she felt the lift of his chest as he took a deep breath. 'Lonely like me, is that it?'

'Often. It isn't a good feeling.'

'There's an oriental word for it, *sabisha*. Appropriate for a girl in a silk kimono.'

Have you any notion, I wonder, what it feels like for a blind man to have you in his arms? It could be a delirium, of course.'

She gave a little laugh and reached up to touch his forehead and that jag of blond hair. 'Don't get too lightheaded, *mynheer*. I'm not Miss World.'

'You are silk and a divine softness, and the scent of you—' His arms clenched around her and his breath swept across her face. 'I want you until the muscles cramp in my stomach—we shall have to arrange the wedding right away!'

'We,' she took the plunge, 'we don't have to wait for that, not if you—oh, you know what I mean.'

For a powerfully beating moment his arms were like a vice around her and his body was very still, like a tiger crouching. Then he slowly relaxed his hold on her.

'No. I believe you're a virgin and I won't change that until we are married.'

'Not many men of today would take that view,' she said, quietly, and into her eyes as she looked at him there came a dazzling glow ... what if he did love her without knowing it himself? Surely he felt more than desire for her if he compelled himself to wait until everything was legal? She hungered to believe it, for so many men took what they wanted and didn't care a straw that the girl gave herself because nature had made her more loving than any other creature on the face of the earth. It was part of everything called woman; a built-in trick of biology, but for a man ... even for Paul, it was the pleasure drive; the immolation in sheer sensual joy. Her eyes searched his face, with its fine, hard structure of bone under the clear, tanned skin, and he answered her as if he read her mind.

'I come of a rather strict Dutch family. I was educated at a Jesuit school, where the discipline was strict and the cane a fact of learning. There is something on the edge of terror for boys who are tutored by the celibate priests; there is ritual in it, a planting of a belief in the dark powers as well as the pure ones.

There is also bred a capacity for hard work, a need to make full use of one's brain and sinew. That's what haunts me. The dark powers took my sight and flung me on the beach. I possess only nostalgia for what I had ... that and a discipline I must hold on to or become the complete beachcomber.'

'You will never be that,' she said urgently. 'You'll find other things to do—perhaps another book?'

'I want to use my hands,' he groaned. 'I lie awake at night—it's that hellish wakefulness in the dark of the night that gets me down. You will be there, just as soon as we are married, and I warn you there's a tiger howling in me.'

'*Sang Harimau*,' she murmured. 'I shall have to learn not to be afraid of you.'

'Are you truly afraid—ah, you don't have to answer. I've felt it in you, especially tonight, but physical passion is a dangerous emotion and you woke it in me after months of atrophy. I have to say it, little one, but you deserve to pay the price.'

'I—I'm only a woman, *mynheer*. Can I help that?'

'No more than I can help being a blind man whom you fooled with your play-acting. Do you mind my blindness? Is it that which scares you, the idea of being my wife?'

'Not really.' Merlin knew very well what scared her, and even yet she was unsure of the working of his mind, trained long ago by the Jesuits, then later by the dedications of his supremely delicate type of surgery.

'I think it does. All the time we have talked I have felt a sort of fear in your body. I shan't hurt you.'

'I'm a woman and I know about pain.' Merlin said it with a slight smile, for she ached with love even as he held her, the pressure of his arms like warm golden chains, binding her to a lover who might yet become her torturer.

'Then what is really at the root of your fear?' he asked, his voice low and deep.

'The fact that it was a woman who caused my loss of sight; my loss of usefulness.'

'Yes,' her throat had gone dry. 'Possibly.'

'Why do you tremble—you aren't that woman, are you?'

She had no words to form a coherent reply. A shock as from a dangerous wire had run its current right through her bones and she couldn't suppress a low cry from her heart itself.

'Come,' he laughed softly, 'I was only making a joke.'

But had it been a joke? Had she not caught a deadly note of meaning deep in his voice? Suddenly she felt a sense of perilous dream, as of being suspended on the lip of a towering ledge, with a long way to fall, all the way to hell itself. She had to face it. There was no easy way to heaven in marrying Paul, but there was a good chance of finding hell if he did connect her with the agony of seared eyes and the shattering terror of never seeing again.

'I know what is wrong with you,' he mocked softly. 'You want all the usual romantic clichés and the promises of rapture. You want me to speak of love even if it's a lie. What is love? I will tell you, *meisje*. It's part of the sun, the sky, the sudden smile. It has nothing to do with the black world I inhabit, where there are no smiles, and no stars to relieve the eternal darkness. Love is seeing love in someone's eyes. Love is seeing a face lit with warmth and wonder. How can I talk of love when I can never see the evidence of it?'

'You might—feel it!' she replied, her mouth twisted by pain from his almost brutal honesty ... that to speak of love to her would be a lie.

'Do you plan to fake it for me, my consummate little actress?'

'Must you say things like that, *mynheer*?'

'It gives me a certain satisfaction to say them. You have played a highly dangerous game with a very disillusioned man.'

'I only meant it for the best, Paul, and never for a moment did I think of you as a fool.' She softened her voice. 'Aren't you going to forgive me?'

'I am going to marry you,' he said drily. 'Does that not count as some sign of forgiveness?'

'Marriage can mean different things to a man and a woman.' Merlin hesitated.

'When the novelty wears off you might start wishing you had stayed a bachelor.'

After all, a secretary can be dismissed with a minute's notice, but a wife is rather more difficult to get rid of.'

'You, *meisje*, are the one who seems to have reservations. I do scare you ... is it the

bitterness in me?’

‘I understand why you feel bitter and cheated. I’m not insensitive, *mynheer*.’

‘I agree, you are far from being insensitive. The blind develop an instinct about people, but all the same you had me fooled—or did I allow myself to be fooled because I would have sent you packing had I realised your true age. I would not have risked what has now come about, that I would want you, and out of pity you would agree to be wanted.’

‘It isn’t pity,’ she protested.

‘Oh, then what is it that makes a blind man so attractive to a girl?’

‘You’re still the same man you always were, except that your eyes have been hurt. I—I find you attractive.’ Her skin felt hot and Merlin waited with apprehension for him to jeer at her, but instead he looked strange, almost stricken, and his lips moved as if he couldn’t find the sardonic words that would have cut her down.

‘You—you’re a sentimental young idiot,’ he said finally. ‘You probably read too many romantic novels of the Ethel M. Dell variety, with the poor damned hero blighted of his limbs or his sight. It won’t always be romantic with me! I’ve one hell of a temper and I get impatient with having to be shaved and decently dressed by someone else, and of having my food laid out as if I’m a damn great baby. It won’t be all kisses and roses, Miss Lakeside.’

‘I know. There will be times when you’ll need a whipping-boy.’

‘You are no boy, *meisje*.’ A smile edged his mouth, subtle and also rather sensual. ‘You are very much a girl, as I discovered at the height of the storm. You have lovely skin, so smooth and supple it’s like running my hands through cream. Sweet heaven,’ his voice suddenly thickened, ‘I feel like a man who is coming out of prison. Let me—your lips, Merlin, I must kiss you!’

She put her lips to his and with a hunger that was just a little terrifying he crushed her breathlessly close to him, his mouth exploring her face, her throat, the slim warmth of her neck. His lips were firm yet with a certain fullness that was intensely pleasurable as he made her untutored mouth respond to his, urging open her lips and waking their sensitive nerves to a hunger that matched his own. Her arms locked themselves about his neck, and all of her was melting sensation as she felt his mouth moving down inside her kimono, caressing her until she gave way to a soft little moan.

‘God, but you’re sweet.’ His face pressed to her, and her body was arched over his arm so that her hair streamed against the black leather of the couch, a coolness under her nape and the heat of Paul’s mouth against her skin. ‘Merlin, slim, creamy Merlin, I’m glad you like to kiss.’

‘I—I like kissing you,’ she confessed. ‘I’ve never done anything with a man before.’

‘Incredible as it seems, I believe you,’ he laughed softly, with a kind of triumph that he, a blind man, could make a woman feel this way. ‘Yet you worked among doctors, some of whom are fearful Don Juans. How come you kept yourself so innocent?’

‘I had my ideals—oh, Paul!’ She shivered with pleasure as he moved his lips along the soft skin of her inner arm; even loving him she hadn’t dreamed that her response to him would be so exciting, so heavenly. Through her lashes her eyes shone like golden-brown

stars.

‘And I happen to fit your idea of the ideal lover?’ he murmured, and a certain mockery had crept into his voice. ‘Can you really say that of a man who is unable to see what your eyes are like when he kisses you?’

This time his mouth took hers with a sudden roughness. His face and touch had become harsh, as if with frustration because he was denied the power and pleasure of seeing her face as she was kissed ... the helpless tilt to her head, like that of a flower on a wind-bent stalk, yielding to what was stronger and more ruthless.

This time Merlin could feel his lips bruising her, but she lay quiescent in his arms and let him rake the anger and frustration out of his system, using her to whip the memory of being told that a careless hand had made him blind.

Only he didn’t believe that it had been a careless hand ... he believed that it had been a deliberate one, and it had left a black despair and distrust in his heart. All he felt, all he could feel, was the physical hunger of a desire that wasn’t love.

But love had to counter-balance the fear in Merlin’s heart, and there under his hurting mouth she was again the victim ... pale, slim, offered up to this hostile blond god whom she had learned to love when he hadn’t even noticed that she was alive.

When he drew away from her, thrusting the hair from his brow, Merlin lay wearily against the leather and the stars in her eyes had been drowned out by the big tears that filled them. She couldn’t make him see again. She could not give him the one thing he wanted above everything. She could only give him love, and he didn’t really want it... he only wanted her slim, warm girl’s body.

As she watched him through wet eyes he ran his fingertips over the face of his watch, a specially made Vacheron Constantin on a wide strap, with raised numerals so he could braille the time. ‘The night is half over,’ he said, ‘and you must be devilishly tired. You are very quiet, *meisje*. Have I wearied you with my kisses?’

‘No,’ her voice was husky. ‘I’m yours, and that’s all there is to it, *mynheer*.’

‘My sacrificial lamb,’ he jeered softly. ‘Tomorrow I shall send for an old jeweller who lives down in the *kampong* and request that he bring an assortment of gems so we can have a ring made for you. Also he can see about some pearls for you to be married in—pearls, I think, will complement that skin of yours.’

‘You seem to have a fixation about my skin,’ she said tartly. ‘I might be covered in enormous freckles for all you know.’

‘You might indeed.’ He leaned forward and his fingers found her cheek and gave it a stroke. ‘When a man has to rely on touch in place of sight he gets quite good at it, and I’m quite sure that the tint and texture of your skin is pure, unadulterated cream, all the way to the bottom of the pastry. I intend to arrange our marriage right away. When I start touching you the voltage is likely to blow, and I’m rather impressed that in this age of birth pills and cheap sin, I have come upon a girl who has virtue. Yet you’re a passionate child, aren’t you?’ His fingertips slid to her lips and brailled them. ‘Did I hurt your mouth with my somewhat less than tender kisses?’

'No—I'm all right.'

'I can feel a dampness on your skin. Have you been crying?'

'No.'

'Don't lie to me, *meisje*. I was angry, but not really with you—God, I don't know!' His face twisted. 'Maybe I should send you away instead of marrying you! How can I tell what I might do to any woman since that bitch—I am sorry about the tears.' He leaned lower and this time his lips were infinitely gentle on her mouth. 'Merlin, you and I are trapped, for though I should let you go, the devil in me won't slide open the bolt and let you fly away. I have tasted the cream on top of the confection and I want it all... and you want me, don't you?'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I want you very much.'

'Then it will suffice.' He rose abruptly to his feet, towering over the couch where she lay in the glimmer of her kimono. 'Come, it's time you were in bed ...

your own bed until I get that ring on your finger!'

But too much had happened, there had been too tremendous an upheaval for Merlin to fall asleep very easily. She tossed from side to side of her bed, disarranging the netting with her outflung arm, seeing Paul's face vividly set against the darkness, feeling as if his arms were still around her, while all they had said to each other kept running through her mind, giving her no peace.

She drifted off to sleep near dawn, and when she awoke the houseboys were hammering away repairing shutters and windows and other damage the typhoon had caused. Out of all that torn darkness the morning had come in cascades of flame and gold, but it wasn't until Merlin rose and dressed and went downstairs that she saw some of the havoc out in the compound.

Steam rose from the puddles as the sun climbed above the trees, brilliant butterflies and birds lay broken and dead in the mud, creepers lay twisted in their milky sap, and there was a crashed sandalwood tree that gave off a strong fragrance even as it lay there with its roots torn out of the ground. Great torn banana leaves were flung about like so many bedraggled flags, and the air was filled with the earthy scent of a thousand slaughtered flowers.

Merlin walked sadly in the garden, with its mud-spattered water-dock and leaf-choked lotus pool. And here a lovely sunshine tree had been felled, its golden bells filled with mud. Moths large as sparrows, lizards and giant crickets made no more sudden movements.

Sad as it all was, it could have been much worse, and when Merlin went to the kitchen she found the cook there making breakfast and was reassured that the people of the *kampung* had been quite all right down in the tea-sheds. At the height of the storm, he told her, a baby had been born and the mother was going to call the little boy Tofan, which meant typhoon.

'You and *tuan* okay?' He gave her a sudden impudent smile. 'I see you make dinner for him. Him eat it all right?'

'*Tuan* eat it fine.' she replied, and suddenly felt heat in her cheeks as she remembered what Paul had said about the islanders regarding her as his *nyai*. It just hadn't occurred to her, but now she realised that it was only natural that they should think such a thing. They didn't know the meaning of the word platonic but had a simple philosophy that man and woman were made for each other as the sun was made to ripen the fruit.

Suddenly it swept over her in a breathtaking wave ... she and Paul were going to be married. He was going to arrange the wedding without delay, and she was filled with the breathless miracle of it. Paul's wife, free to let loose the love that filled her heart.

'The *nonya* look plenty happy,' the cook remarked, cocking his head at her.

'You enjoy the typhoon, all alone here with *tuan*.'

'Who could enjoy that?' She kept her eyes down and drank from the tea-bowl he had handed her. 'And the *tuan* couldn't be left all on his own, now could he? Trouble needs company, that's why I stayed here at the house instead of going down to the tea-sheds with the others.'

'All same, *nonya* not sorry to stay, eh? Big wind come and she cuddle up to the big boss.' Suddenly the cook began to choke with laughter at the indignant look Merlin gave him. 'Is all right, mees, we all knowing because *tuan* tell his boy who shave him and pick out his shirt. *Tuan* go mainland with Lon, see priest about become *suami* of the *nonya*. We plenty pleased, I tell you. Big man should have wife and *baji*. Him much brave like *harimau*, but blind in eyes and need woman very much ... love take away some of the hurting, eh?'

Merlin's eyes stung and she was moved by the simple honest words, and relieved that Paul had let his household staff know that she was to become their mistress. She hadn't known how they would take it, and was happy that she wasn't going to be resented. But the basic truth was that Paul did need her and these people realised it. They probably thought he was legalising their relationship, but she no longer minded being taken for his *nyai*. The status of wife was different and she could let it show that she cared for *tuan* Paul and wanted his happiness beyond anything.

'I'm going to do my best,' she said, 'to take away the hurting. I'm glad none of you mind that he's going to marry me.'

'Why mind?' The cook gave her a somewhat puzzled look. 'You plenty nice girl, though liking to be called old woman. That English type joke? Or maybe wool over eyes of island people.'

Merlin couldn't help a shamefaced smile. 'A sort of joke,' she said.

'Very strange. Often older woman like to be thought younger, but not the other way round. You having *makan pagi* now? Nice bit of fish, eh?'

'I think I could eat a horse—oh, sorry, Sengit, another idiotic bit of English humour.'

'No, more sensible,' he argued. 'You eat and get pretty fat like my wife. *Tuan* like that. Plenty more to cuddle.'

Merlin smiled and sat down at the table to eat her breakfast. She was thrilled that Paul was going to the mainland today to set in motion the machinery of their marriage ...

dared she believe that his eagerness had a little love in it?

There was no doubt in her own heart about her tremendous love for him, and she would use it with everything she had to make his darkness a little brighter. It would, it must, for it was like something molten running through her veins and tingling in her very bones; she had never felt so aware of being alive and expectant.

Was she just a little shameless? The smile deepened on her mouth. Perhaps she was, for she could hardly wait for the blissful certainty of belonging body and soul to Paul. It was a love that intensified the sheer excitement of what lay ahead of her, and she was going to hug it to her heart and pray that the past could be buried.

'The fish get cold if *nonya* sit there dreaming about wedding,' Sengit remarked, watching her with a knowing smile.

'Sengit, is it tempting fate to be so—happy? Don't your people say that it's better to cast down the eyes in case the devil sees the joy in them?'

'Maybe so,' he nodded. 'But you want happiness enough you get it, you want sorrow it comes.'

'Who could want sorrow, Sengit?'

'*Tuan* very much blind because of what a woman do to him—you afraid of that, mees. Sengit see you looking at him sometimes like young doe with tiger.'

'I love him,' she said quietly. 'Even if he meant to kill me, I think I would still go on loving him.'

'Doe with tiger, like I say. Now you eat *makan pagi* and not worry, just be happy like girl meant to be. You go to temple and see holy Buddha, that make peace in your heart.'

'Perhaps,' she said, but in the hours that followed it helped her more to go round the house tidying up after the upheaval of the storm. Paul had wished her a brief goodbye and said he would be back in the morning ... there had been a touch of constraint between them and he had gone to see about their marriage without kissing her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE priest who was to perform the marriage was flown from the mainland in the helicopter, and the simple ceremony took place in the salon of the Tiger House.

Afterwards the priest asked if he could have a few private words with the bride, and Paul left them alone together.

Somewhat nervously Merlin fingered the rings on her hand, a gold chiselled wedding band and a companion ring set with a glorious moonstone. Moon fire, the old gem-setter had called the stone, because it was such a flawless one that it reflected many shades of opalescent light when it was on the move on a woman's hand.

'I hope you don't mind that I wished to have a few minutes alone with you?' Father Lukas Adrian was not a lot older than Paul, but in his dark cassock and ivory-white reversed collar he seemed just a little severe.

'Not at all, Father. I think I expected it.'

'Ah, so we understand one another. You are a very young woman to be wedded to a blind man. You are not of his faith?'

Merlin shook her head. 'I am Church of England, Father.'

'You do realise, child, that the ceremony I have performed is a totally committed one? Until death.'

'I suspected it.' Much of the Dutch she had not understood and had been too nervous to be anything but automatic in her English responses to the vows.

'Then you must love this young man very much indeed?' Father Lukas spoke in a deep, rather beautiful voice that matched his appearance.

'I love him with my life,' she replied simply.

'Let us hope so, young woman, for it isn't going to be easy for you, being the wife of a vital, highly intelligent man who resents bitterly what fate has done to him and his brilliant career.'

'A woman did it, Father.'

'So you know about that?' His eyes were fixed intently upon her face, a pale cameo set in the high collar of her dress. 'Mynheer van Setan told you of this himself?'

Merlin hesitated. 'Yes, he told me.'

'But I think you knew of this in advance, before you came to Pulau-Indah?'

It may even have been your reason for coming, eh?' Father Lukas's eyes were too penetrating; he was far too wise and shrewd to accept a fabrication, and Merlin had to confess that she had known certain things about Paul's blindness before she came to the island.

'You loved him then?'

'I greatly admired him as a surgeon,' she replied, 'but it wasn't until I grew to know him as a man that I fell deeply in love with him.'

'Despite his—handicap? I am obliged to call it that, my child, because total blindness cannot be ignored by the person closest to the afflicted person. Your love will need to be a

strong one because it will be tested many times. Are you prepared for that?’

‘I—I hope so.’

He frowned a little, allowing his eyes to assess her youth and obvious lack of worldliness. ‘If at any time you need counsel, then come and see me. The young islander, Lon, will bring you, and you can make the excuse of wishing to go shopping on the mainland.’ Abruptly his lean dark face relaxed into a smile. ‘A white lie never did too much harm, eh?’

‘I hope not, Father.’ Merlin returned his smile.

‘It is the deliberate lie that causes harm and sometimes a great deal of damage.

Now I will go to your bridegroom and inform him that you eagerly await him.’

‘Thank you, Father Lukas, for your kindness.’

‘It isn’t too difficult to be kind to a girl who obviously cares that her blind husband find some ray of hope and joy in his darkness. Mynheer van Setan was an important man in his field, and now he has to search for a new way of life.

You must help him find it. God bless you, child, and may your marriage bring you joy.’

The tall priest walked from the room, and Merlin’s legs felt so unsteady that she was glad to sink down on the couch, where she rested her cheek against the cool leather. She felt the pressure of her rings against her face, both of them a solid reassurance that she was now the wife of Paul van Setan, and hopefully prepared to face the future with him. It was the past that wouldn’t stop haunting her, though she felt certain Father Lukas would keep to himself any of the facts he might have discovered about her—that she had worked at the same hospital as Paul, using the surname of her stepfather but reverting to her baptismal name when she came to work for Paul. If the priest had read details of the tragedy he would assume like everyone else that she was the culprit and not the scapegoat.

But he would also regard her marriage as sacrosanct and consider that in loving Paul she had found a way to make recompense in some small measure. Her marriage, he had warned, would not be an easy one; she had to face the fact that Paul was an embittered man.

Dear God, she had not expected it to be easy, she had only hoped that it might be a little loving. But Paul had been reserved and aloof throughout the wedding service, and after sliding the gold ring on to her finger he had not bent his head to kiss her, and there she had stood with her face raised for his kiss and had felt as if icy fingers brushed her skin in place of those warm lips. He had gazed at the sunlight he couldn’t distinguish from darkness, while Father Lukas had concluded the words of the ceremony that bound her to this tall, grim, unresponsive bridegroom.

Merlin sighed and wondered if his manner had anything to do with the wire he had received from his cousin Hendrik. Paul hadn’t asked her to read it to him.

Instead he and Lon had gone into the den while she waited in the hall in her simple wedding dress, feeling as if she had a rope around her neck instead of a string of large milky pearls.

When they emerged from the den Paul had said briefly that his cousin was delayed by

the tea-brokers and would not be back in time to attend their wedding. He had not added that Hendrik sent his congratulations, which seemed to indicate that his cousin was outraged that in the weeks he had been on leave Paul had met, and arranged to marry, the woman hired to do his secretarial work. Hendrik must have assumed that she was a fast worker ... or did his omission of good wishes hold a darker motive?

On this day of days Merlin had so hoped for everything to be ... if not perfect, at least quietly happy. But even as she found herself a bride, she felt lost in shadows of doubt and fear. The past wouldn't stay buried ... like a cruel spectre it touched her wedding day ... touched her shoulder. She turned her head sharply and saw Paul standing over her!

'I hope Father Lukas didn't say anything to upset you, *meisje*? He no doubt considers it a perilous step in the dark for you to be taking in marrying me.'

'He was extremely kind and understanding, Paul.' Merlin sat up and smoothed her ruffled hair. 'He wished us sincere happiness together.'

'He's a Jesuit, and those fellows are deep as the sea.' Paul gripped her shoulder as he sat down beside her. 'That service is a rather solemn one, so I hope it didn't unnerve you?'

'Not too much. Being mainly Dutch it wasn't entirely comprehensible to me, but I thought there was something rather beautiful about it.'

'Something in the nature of those shadows in a Rembrandt painting, eh? If they weren't there—and I speak from memory, of course—the picture would not be complete nor half so haunting.'

Her eyes wildly searched his face, for it seemed to her that he was using words with a subtle meaning to them. She wanted to ask him what had been in Hendrik's wire, and yet she couldn't face the anger she might release in him, if there had been some hint that Paul was marrying the girl who had been blamed for blinding him.

She belonged to him now, and preferably in the deep silence of unspoken accusation, paying with herself in the way he asked of her.

'Has Father Lukas left?' Merlin dropped her gaze to the moonstone on her hand, holding in the centre of it a trembling radiance that her heart longed to feel.

Paul was only inches away from her and with every nerve she was aware of him in his impeccable dark-blue suit, sheer white shirt and blue-grey tie, with oval, dark-stoned links gleaming as his cuffs. His grey eyes were like zircons, so steely and brilliant it was incredible that he couldn't really see her. She felt the soft thunder of her pulses and wanted to be drawn to his chest, his arms painfully hard around her, letting her feel the desire as she had felt it on the night of the typhoon.

Ja, the good priest has flown away to his flock, and now you and I are irrevocably joined in wedlock.' He took her ringed hand and his fingers played over the moonstone. 'Is this as lovely as the old man told me it was?'

'It's like moonlight, Paul, gleaming with a soft radiance.'

'Like you, *kindje*!' he murmured. 'Are you softly radiant, with those large eyes of yours all starry with wonder? After all, you are now the bride of the *tuan besar*, the big boss, who will protect and keep you in darkness and doubt.'

‘Paul—for mercy’s sake!’ His grip was grinding her rings into the flesh and bone of her finger until she had to give way to a gasp of pain. ‘What’s the matter with you— why are you behaving like this?’

‘You are mine to protect, are you not? To worship, set ting aside all those other women who are clamouring to belong to a man who cannot give voice to those magical words—how lovely you are looking tonight, my dear, and how those pearls match the creamy texture of your skin.’

‘Please—Paul—you’ll break my finger in a moment!’

But lost in dark thought, he took no notice of her plea.

‘I—I don’t know if y-you realise it, Paul, but you’re crushing my finger—oh, please!’ Tears started to her eyes, for it wasn’t only the pain that was unbearable, it was the mood he was in. She might have thought he’d been drinking except that there wasn’t a hint of alcohol on his breath and the whites of his grey eyes were periectly clear—no, it was something else which had caused this cruel, cynical mood, and Merlin’s distress was both physical and mental. Oh God, why didn’t he get it over with, say outright that she was the careless—no, he didn’t believe that carelessness had caused his blindness, he believed something far more terrible.

‘Paul, I didn’t.’

‘What?’ He frowned. ‘Your finger—holy hell, have I been grinding it to a jelly?’ The blaze died down in his eyes and the ridged jaw muscle slowly relaxed, and the next instant her fingers were at his mouth and he was kissing them, taking that third finger into his lips until the ebbing pain was mingled in Merlin with a rising tide of sensation that took her breath away. It was holy hell and heaven the way he could play with her feelings,. her crazy, lovelorn emotions that allowed him to torment her one minute, and the next make her melt with longing as his wide shoulders loomed over her and his breath stirred her hair.

‘Bear with me, little one.’ His fingers found the pearls at her throat and fondled them. ‘I have a wife, but is there any real hope that I can protect and keep you—what if you grow weary of leading me about?’

‘Oh, don’t say such a thing!’ Merlin pressed her hand to his lips. ‘Do you think I mind what I do for you? I want to care for you and comfort you—and do take that suffering look off your face, Paul! I’m not doing an audition for *East Lynne*—I can see how terribly nice you look in your dark suit and beautiful white shirt. There’s nothing so attractive as a man in a perfect suit and shirt.’

‘What is your game, *kindje*?’ His fingers played with her earlobe. ‘Are you seducing me, or are you afraid I’m going to have another try at breaking your fingers?’

‘Paul, when you say things like that you make me go shivery!’

‘It isn’t the talk that does it, my dear, it’s touching your ears just here at the back where the skin is like velvet. There is nothing more sensitive than a woman’s ears, but you are really as innocent as a baby, aren’t you? You have never committed a sin in your sweet life, have you?’

Merlin searched his face, trying to read what lay behind his sardonic expression. It

could be due to edginess because he couldn't see what she looked like; she was his bride after all, and marriage was just as big a step to a man as it was to a woman. Two people tied together in the most intimate relationship in the whole of life, able to bring them infinite joy if there was enough love and tolerance between them ... but at no time had Paul spoken of love, and Merlin couldn't put out of her mind his almost stony behaviour all through the wedding service.

If only she knew what had been in that wire from Hendrik! Lon knew, but Paul would have told him to keep the contents to himself had they contained any mention of her in connection with his eyes. Merlin was unnerved and terribly unsure. She didn't know what to make of his mood. Perhaps he was thinking that if he still had his sight he would never have married someone who lacked the soignée sophistication he had liked in his women. Perhaps he felt cheated ... a blind man who made the most of her because she was conveniently at hand under his roof.

'Your face is cold, *meisje*. Has it been an ordeal marrying me?'

'I believe you're the one who thinks of it as an ordeal,' she said, in a driven way. 'In normal circumstances you wouldn't have dreamed of marrying someone like me! You had—I feel sure you had beautiful girl-friends with lots of smart and witty conversation, certain of their place in the world, poised and perfectly dressed.'

'Aren't you perfectly dressed right now?' His hand found her shoulder and moved slowly down her side, waking all the tiny nerves under her skin. 'What is this material, it feels as soft and fine as mist?'

'Shantung.' Her voice quivered, though his touch was light it seemed to send tiny currents of feeling deep into her bones, a sensation almost on the edge of torment.

'Shantung,' he repeated after her. 'And what kind of colour—no, don't tell me. I am going to make a guess, for I have a feeling you are not wearing white. I wonder why? Is it because we aren't a wildly romantic couple, but two people who find it a comfort to cling together in the dark? Don't start like that!' His hand was resting under her heart. 'Now let me see—if only I could!—with your unusual eyes I think you might choose honey-gold or amber. Didn't you say your eyes were cognac with a dash of champagne?'

'I said nothing of the sort—as if I would!' There was a catch in her throat at the softly thrilling caress of his hand ... she ached for him to take her now, using headlong desire to subdue the nagging doubts and suspicions. Oh, if only she were a woman of assurance who would know exactly what to say and do, but much as she adored Paul she was as unsure of him as if he were the tiger the islanders called him. She had to let his mood be her guide, fighting not to give way to her feelings as his fingers found the tiny pearl buttons at the front of her dress.

'You're all tensed as if to spring away from me,' he mocked, as he fingered the buttons with a kind of sensuous deliberation. Merlin waited with bated breath, and then his hand slid to her waist.

'I understand from Lon that the islanders are laying on a feast for us in the courtyard of their temple—they call it the Temple of the Seven Delights. You will be in a position to

see the carved images on the walls, so you will have to describe to me, *liefje*, what these teasing delights look like.'

'A feast,' she said, blushing slightly, well aware of the carvings because she had seen them on one of her solitary afternoon walks, adorning the walls of the old temple set in a grove of frangipani trees, with dragon eaves and a cascade of overhanging balconies like cages hung upon the walls. There were steps like carved leaves of lotus leading up to the entrances, set round with fringes of sculptured stone in the form of demons and serpent tails intertwined. The frescoes themselves had been more than explicit and yet with a simple integrity that was part of the island philosophy; love was the many-sided key to everything, woman the gate and man the hand that opened it.

'Are you blushing?' Paul touched her cheek. 'Yes, I can feel your skin glowing.'

You know, *mijn ganzen*, you were not quite correct when you said a while ago that I would in normal circumstances have preferred a sophisticated woman. I see no fun in that, as it happens.'

'Fun?' she echoed him. 'You mean with a woman of the world you wouldn't be able to—to take the mickey?'

'Is that what I'm doing to you?' he mocked. 'It rather felt as if I were making a little preliminary love to you, feeling my way so as not to startle you. You don't have to describe the frescoes to me if you don't want to. I think I can fill in the pictures for myself, but when I speak of fun I want you to understand that it can be an amusing pleasure for a man and his *vrouw* to explore all the shades and meaning of being together. We are going to be very much together. I expect you to realise that. I happen to want you like the very devil—despite everything.'

Merlin stared into his face, seeing the way it abruptly hardened when he spoke those last two words. The amusement, the hint of indulgent mockery, vanished into the bronze mask and his eyes held that deadly little glow at the centres of them.

The hand of fear clutched her heart, the iron fingers of apprehension made her gasp.

'You are not to worry.' His lips were at her ear. 'I shall make it my pleasure to please you, little one. I know you are shy, and I imagine there is fear in those big doe-like eyes of yours. Are you afraid the tiger is going to gobble you up, bones and all?'

'Of course not—I'm not a baby, Paul.'

'A baby,' he murmured, and buried his lips in the side of her soft neck, moving his mouth against her skin until he found the fast-beating pulse at the base of her throat. 'There will be no son or daughter of mine who I can't guide through life, into a decent human being. I have married you for myself and I intend to share you with no one. Is that understood?'

'If you say so, Paul.' Anything ... everything, if he would only go on kissing her like this ... she moved against him almost unaware, the lids of her eyes feeling as if little weights were attached to them, a sensation that had nothing to do with being sleepy. She had never felt so aware, so sentient, so alive to being a woman.

His lips clung to hers for long moments, and then drew away. 'That will have to do for now,' he drawled. 'As I told you, we are to be honoured with a marriage feast and the

islanders will be hurt if we don't attend. I think it would please them if you dressed in the traditional gown of an island bride, and I have told Lon to bring you a *kain*, a long wrap-around skirt of rich silk, and a *kebaya* jacket of lace. Keep on your pearls, and also wear this.'

He took from his pocket a fairly small object wrapped in tissue paper, and when he opened the little package a gold bracelet was revealed, unusually set with three tiny golden bells.

'Give me your wrist, *meisje*,' he said. 'I am going to lock this around it—you see, the bracelet cannot be undone once the little latch is closed. Now I'll always know where you are.'

Merlin gazed at the bell bracelet in some astonishment. 'It's a slave device,' she exclaimed. 'Paul, what do you take me for? Do you think I'd run away from you?'

He gave a short laugh and moved her wrist so the little bells made a tinkling sound. 'Where there are bells there are no demons, so it is said.'

'A little exorcism for me?' she asked, and deep down inside herself she felt convinced that Hendrik's wire had contained some reference to her as the nurse who had been blamed for his blindness, who had been too shocked and stunned to offer any resistance to the accusation. Who would have listened? Shy, quiet people often took the blame for the crimes of others, and she had no defence against Paul's bitterness.

She ached deep down that Paul should believe like everyone else that she was capable of causing him agony ... all she wanted was to give him happiness.

'Take it off, Paul,' she requested. 'I don't want to wear it—like some cruel little cat who will tear open the throats of birds unless I'm belled!'

'It would have to be filed off,' he said. 'It's just a piece of jewellery, so don't let your imagination run away with you.'

'I want it off!' Merlin began to struggle to move the gold circlet over her clenched in fingers, but it was too narrow and the bells made a crazy music of their own as she tried to be rid of the bracelet.

'Stop that!' Paul reached out and closed iron fingers about her hand. 'I want you to wear the bracelet and that is good enough. Some of the island brides don't remove theirs from the day they marry to the day they die. Little idiot, it's a talisman, a protection from evil. And I daresay it looks pretty on your slim wrist.'

As he spoke he lifted her wrist and kissed the inside of it.

His lips on any part of her person could always weaken her resistance and Merlin could see from the set of his jaw that he had made up his mind that the bracelet was going to stay exactly where he had placed it. 'Not a little cat, *meisje*, but my belled dove. They have them in the courtyard of the Temple of the Seven Delights—an appropriate-sounding place for a marriage feast, don't you agree?'

'I can see what sort of a husband you're going to be,' she rejoined. 'So I'm to go around tinkling like some slave girl in your harem. Don't you want to put another one on my ankle?'

He laughed and moved her hand against his throat. 'You have at times a tongue as

tangy as bitter orange. *Kindje*, don't you know that when I hear those little bells in the night, when you turn over at my side, I shall know I'm not alone in that black pit I didn't ask to live in. Will you deny me the small pleasure of hearing that soft music on your slim arm, so I can reach out from the darkness and feel you there?'

'Oh—Paul.' Her throat had choked up. 'Paul, I didn't think of it like that. My dear, I'll wear a cowbell if you want me to! I deserve it, being such a cow over the bracelet.'

'No,' he stroked a thumb against her wrist and Merlin knew her pulsebeat was palpable to him, 'I happen to like it that you have spirit and courage. I wouldn't want a tame bird in my nest.'

'In your tiger house, you mean.' Summoning the courage, for it was still a kind of half-frightening dream that he was hers to touch and caress if she so wished, Merlin leaned forward and put her lips to his cheek, breathing the Tiger Balm on his shaven skin, feeling the hard warmth of the well-defined bone as she moved her mouth against him. She felt him catch his breath and he crushed her slim warmth close to his hard body.

'You feel like a willow bending to a strong wind,' he murmured. 'Did you know that in the mythical language of the island the willow is the woman, the palm, is the man?'

'Like poetry,' she said, and her hand moved along his shoulder and the potent difference of the male was alarming to her and also very exciting; the power in his shoulders made her feel fragile and at the same time aware of her own feminine influence over him. She knew that the scent and feel of her could carry him beyond the cruel reef of memories into the deeps of physical desire, and instinct told her that she would be comparatively safe with him while desire had ascendancy over him ... beyond that Merlin didn't dare look. She closed her eyes to the rending rocks and let herself drift with the tide of sensuous pleasure as Paul caressed her in silence with his firm and beautiful hands. She felt a throb as he lit a flame deep inside her, a sweet and stabbing fire that would immolate all the torments she shared with him, with every step he took in his blindness.

'You are more divinely sweet than anyone I ever touched in my life,' he whispered. 'You just cannot realise what it does to me—ah, we must stop this, *meisje!* We have a party to attend, and I think I hear footsteps coming along the hall right now. Lon, I expect, with your costume. You will agree to wear it?'

'Yes, I'll wear the *kain* and *kebaya* and try to look as much like an island bride as possible.'

'Yes, do that,' he urged softly. 'Wear your hair loose with a ginger flower in it. I love the scent of ginger.'

Merlin longed to say that she loved him, so much that she ached with it. A lovely, tormenting ache that made her feel slightly dizzy when he released her from his arms. She took several deep breaths, then turned to smile at the lean young Indonesian, who stood just inside the doorway, holding garments of silk and lace across his arm.

He gave her a bow and it seemed to her that his eyes were strangely inscrutable as he said to her: 'Permit me to wish you great joy, *mevrouw.*'

'You're very kind, Lon.' Merlin rose to her feet and approached him, eager to take a

look at the island clothes Paul wanted her to wear to the feast. 'May I see what you have for me? And may I ask who was generous enough to lend them to me?'

'They are yours.' He looked right into her eyes. 'Did you not know? *Tuanku* sent me to the *wanita* who made other things for you and she has just finished sewing them. Very pretty, eh?'

'The silver brocade?' Paul remarked, standing there casually lighting a cheroot from his cylinder lighter with the enclosed flame'. Smoke issued from his nostrils and his eyes were narrowed as Merlin turned to glance at him.

'Paul,' she exclaimed, 'will you never stop giving me things?'

'You like them?'

'Gorgeous! The *kain* is the colour of my moonstone, and there's a lovely *kebaya* in the softest imaginable lace, and there are painted sandals! I—I can't wait to wear them!'

'Give them to her, Lon,' Paul drawled, smoke curling against the deep crease in his cheek. 'Now go and put them on, Merlin. I'll send Tutup to you with a ginger blossom.'

Lon was still searching her face as he handed her the garments; she gave him an inquiring look, her large eyes half-scared of seeing dark accusation in his gaze.

But his slanting eyes revealed very little, and his smile was enigmatical.

'I regret that I cannot offer to be your valet, *meisje*.' Paul said, a quirk to his lips. 'Do you think you'll manage alone?'

'Darling man, I'm not a baby,' she said, and the tiny bells tinkled on her wrist as she hurried away with her booty, running lightly up the stairs to her room ... the bedroom that would become more of a sitting-room after tonight.

Tonight! Holding the lovely *kain* in her arms, Merlin went out on to her balcony to watch the sun going down. She felt the primitive magic of the evening, the fragrant spell that lay over the tea valley. The sky was carmine and sheerest gold, and the various trees were filled with birds, rattling the leaves and fruits as they grouped and hopped and began to settle down as dusk crept over the day.

A dazzling humming-bird lifted and fell among the flowering ines that overhung her balcony wall, then the bursting sunset was lost in a rush of milky darkness.

Now the many fragrances were richer than ever and Merlin took deep breaths of the cooling air, and felt the excitement growing in her veins. Was any of this real, or was it fantasy? She moved her wrist and the little bells made their music ... the bracelet had its symbolism, for she was enslaved by Paul. She didn't know what to expect beyond tonight, and she didn't want to think beyond the temple feast, the dancing, and the joyous culmination in Paul's arms. Whatever was doomed to happen, her heart knew that tonight she would be wrapped in those arms, making the darkness a little more bearable for him. He had not spoken of love, but he had certainly shown her that she was desirable ... and that was all she wanted right now, to be desirable in these lovely things he had ordered for her.

Excitedly Merlin returned to her room, where she removed her simple wedding dress and replaced it with the shining glamour of the silk *kain* and the ivory lace jacket. Her sandals had flowers painted on the heels, and she felt incredibly graceful in the straight line

of the skirt from hip to ankle. She brushed her hair into a shining cascade over the silvery brocade, the honey and amber lights in her hair matched by those in her eyes, so they looked luminous. Her skin looked exciting against the oriental silk ... it was like being clad in moonshine, flowing over the slim outlines of her body.

How much she wished that Paul could see her like this ... how very different she looked from that shy, restrained student nurse who had so often dreamed that Paul van Setan might notice her.

Tonight his island people would see her like this; there would be music, laughter, sincere good wishes, but not for a moment would she stop wondering if Hendrik's wire had revealed her identity to Paul. He harboured a deep hatred in his very soul for the woman who had blinded him, but tonight he was a bridegroom and no matter what he might believe of her, he wanted her.

Merlin clung to that, for it was all she had. It might be all she would ever have, for she believed Paul was capable of killing her if he truly believed that out of sheer frustrated malice she had actually put something into that eye-cup that would darken his life and put an end to his splendid work.

Her fingers clenched his pearls on their jade clasp, glowing like pale satin and smooth to the touch. He'd have her, for there was a tiger in Paul, prowling and smouldering in his blood, and then he would end it because he didn't really believe that life had very much to offer in exchange for what he had lost as a gifted surgeon. There had been a desperate note in his voice when he had said that he longed to use his hands ... clever, sensitive hands that had to remain idle when they longed to hold a scalpel again.

There was no way for him to forgive the nurse who had injured him ... and there had been something in that wire of Hendrik's that gave Merlin this fateful feeling.

Suddenly there was a sound of fingers rapping on her door and her nerves quivered as she swung round from the mirror and watched the door as it opened. Tutup came in, grinning widely and showing his white teeth. '*Tuan* say to give you this, *mem*.' He held out to her on the pale palm of his brown hand a lovely crimson flower. 'Ginger blossom, *mem*, to put in hair, so you look like island girl.'

She smiled, but a nerve was quivering in her lip as she accepted the flower.

Crimson as blood and with a spicy scent that evoked the deep forest where the tigers had their lairs.

'What do you think of my dress, Tutup?' she asked. 'Will I pass for an island girl?'

'You looking much pretty,' he said. 'I tell *tuan*, he be pleased. I tell him *mem* look like temple dancer, making bell music when she moves hands, with hair like wing of wild hawk.'

Merlin stared at the boy, almost stunned by that image of herself. Was that really how she looked? She couldn't quite believe it, but all the same she let Tutup go running off to Paul with that word picture of her. It would do no harm. It might please him that in the *kain* she had an exotic appeal, especially when she had pinned the ginger flower above her left ear—was it the correct ear for a married woman and not the come-hither side used by single

girls? Anyway, what did it matter? Everything tonight was geared to the senses, and if Paul needed the spicy scent of the jungle and a bride in oriental silk, then why should he not have them?

There was nothing she wouldn't give him ... including her life.

She took a final look at herself in the mirror before going down to him ... lost forever, it seemed, was that pale ghost of a nurse in the slender, shimmering figure that the mirror gave back to her. The tiger's bride, she thought, and as she made her way to him the silken *kain* made her walk like an island girl, with a lilt. And there was no way to stop that soft tinkling and chiming on her wrist...

Paul heard it, for he came from the salon as she reached the foot of the stairs and held a hand out to her ... it was uncanny, as if he actually saw her.

'There you are!' His fingers gripped hers. He, too, had changed out of his formal wedding attire and was clad in tropical white, with a tan silk shirt open against his throat. He looked strong, lithe, unbearably exciting to Merlin.

'I am informed by Tutup that you look quite remarkable in the island outfit—like a temple dancer, eh?'

Merlin gazed up at him and searched his face for some sign, some hint of what truly lay in his heart. What was there, waiting to snarl and spring at her? What did the deep purring in the throat really hide?

'I'm sure I look absurd,' she said. 'All that's needed to complete the picture is blue kohl around my eyes.'

'No, *meisje*, I have an idea you now look as you feel in your soul, rare and strange. *Se passionnant pour la passion!*'

"One of Love's lovers!" she murmured, translating the Merimee words into English.

'Yes, my dear. I am a fortunate man, am I not? I don't need to hope for passion in my bride, I know I have it. It is an odd fact of nature that the cooler a woman appears to be, the warmer she is beneath her cool pale skin. Fire in the diamond. Flame deep in the heart ... set free it will be beautifully consuming.'

'Is passion all you ask of me, Paul?'

'For now,' he said, as they walked along the coffee-tree lane that led in the direction of the temple. 'You and I, *meisje*, don't discuss the future—we live for tonight.'

He had all but put it into words, the promise of heaven and hell, and Merlin sought his face with half-wild eyes and wanted to beg him to believe that she had never knowingly hurt him. Overhead the stars were like silver sequins spattering the velvety darkness, masses of them, lakes and eddies of sparkling gems. Great white moths flew in and out of the trees, and all around was the musky scent of dense gold devil flowers, like tiny hot eyes glowing in the shadows. Moon-moths and fireflies, and a feeling at her heart as if the blade of a *kris* had been driven into it.

'Whatever you say, Paul.' She kept her voice low, still holding back like a martyr the scream that had been in her throat ever since the light had been washed out of his eyes. Long, long ago girls had been burned as witches, and she felt as if it were happening to her,

that no matter how she pleaded, she would still find herself tied to the stake, accused and condemned and unable to defend herself. Why it had to be that way Merlin didn't know, but in silence she let Paul lead her into the courtyard of the Temple of the Seven Delights, where the bonfires were leaping and the gongs and bamboo flutes were making their strange music.

As in a dream, a fantasy, Merlin entered into the festivities, kneeling on woven matting with Paul as offerings to the gods were made. Above them, entwined in stone, were the erotic figures forever making love; carved hands upon carved bosoms, and the long stone hair streaming back from the rapturous faces.

The music had aroused the doves that lived in the dragon eaves of the temple and Merlin caught the flicker of their white wings in the firelight and heard the delicate tinkling of the tiny bells fastened to their feet, too light to have any effect on their flying. She saw the movement of Paul's head as he caught the flying sound of the bells and she thought of what he had said to her when he had locked the bell bracelet about her wrist... when he called her his dove he was being sardonic. The only reality lay in his warning that they didn't think about the future but lived only for tonight.

Enchantment, colour, the goodwill of the islanders who laid plum-tinted lotus blossoms at their feet, and murmured : '*Selamet tinggal*—live in peace.'

Pyramids of food and fruit lay on wide wicker plates. A boar had been roasted in hot ashes, complete with its head and stuffed with herbs and onions. And while they ate, sitting with the headman and his wife, they were entertained by the dancers in their jewelled headdresses, with tinted feet and hands that flickered like flames in the glow of the red festival lanterns.

There beneath the camphor trees, and the papayas hung with green-gold fruits, the exquisite hand movements of the dancers were magical, combined with the lantern light playing over their golden skins and slanting eyes.

From the mouths of stone lions leapt jets of water, tumbling into lotus-shaped basins, and one of the temple towers was a mass of frangipani, a scented column of tiny starry flowers. Champac, jasmine, temple-flower and tiger-striped cannas. The praying branches of banyan trees, great moonflowers, and the air aromatic with flowers, spices and the strange spiked durian fruit.

Golden hairpins caught the lantern light in coils of glossy hair, and lovely eastern lace softly draped over silken *kains*, the patterns of the lace making mysterious shadows on dark gold skin. The women smiled at Merlin and came shyly to stroke her hands and wish her joy. She was presented with several charming gifts, a polished sandalwood box, a lovely tortoiseshell comb, a perfumed fan painted with a single lotus. Right now she couldn't help but respond to the enchanting fantasy of her wedding feast, with Paul beside her, eating a slice of boar meat and laughing with the headman and his sons, listening to everything yet unable to see the glowing magic of it all. Merlin nibbled the meat of the ortolans which had been netted in the rice fields, and sipped from her cup of fruit wine. It made her ache that Paul couldn't see the lovely dancers, yet she couldn't help but wonder how she would have

compared in his eyes to those swaying figures in their spangled dresses, the palms of their flexible hands like the inside of pink shells, moving so gracefully to the ching of metal castanets and the wailing bamboo flutes.

Suddenly Paul leaned to her and found her cheek with his hand. He put his lips to her ear: 'These young men tell me that in your silver *hain* you look as if the moon had tossed you into this temple pavilion. I am informed that after a thousand moons of being alone, destiny has brought me a white dove.'

Merlin was speechless, for Paul's breath came quickly against her face, as if it excited him that she was being admired. 'Oh, Paul,' she said at last, 'I do wish you could see the wonder of it all. The dancers and the flowers and the lovely costumes.'

I—I wish I could give you my eyes!

His face was utterly still when she said that, and then she saw a muscle jerk in his jaw. 'You mean that, don't you? Why do you mean it so much?'

I—just do.' She said it very simply, for the truth is simple.

'Don't pity me, *meisje*.' His voice grated. 'The ceiling of my toleration doesn't reach that high. This is my wedding night, and I have already told you what I want from you!'

'Yes, *mynheer*.' Her head drooped and her hair swung forward like a wing folding itself across her face. He didn't want compassion, or what she held in her heart for him. He wanted the shape and feel of her; the scent of her hair and her lips under his mouth. He wanted passion to shatter the darkness for him, if only for breathless moments. She was to do that for him, having aroused in him something he had fought to keep out of his blind life. For long months he had been content to be alone in his bitter darkness, but when the typhoon had struck the island he had pulled her into his arms and a flame had been lit.

Tonight he wanted that flame to burn bright and bold —Merlin could see it deep in his eyes, as if his pupils were phosphorescent. As the feasting went on around her, she feasted her eyes on his head and brow, the proud nose with arched nostrils, the mouth and jawline just ruthless enough to be exciting. The island music had a compelling and pagan quality to it, and she could feel the blood stirring in her veins, and the melting in her bones when Paul slipped an arm about her silky waist. She wanted to be possessed by him beyond all thought, all fear of what the days ahead might bring. Within the hard circle of his arm that was strong enough to break her bones, Merlin watched the dragon dance with bated breath; the masks over the faces of the male dancers were fierce and fascinating, and there wasn't a single doubt that she was being openly courted by her husband. He slipped tiny oysters between her lips and made her swallow them, and insisted that she share with him a cup of rum and pure coconut milk. It was delicious, heady—a lovers' potion, he told her.

He didn't seem to mind at all that everyone could see him courting her, and Merlin could see that the islanders were loving his attentions towards her.

Embroidered bridal pillows were presented to them, and with a smile Paul ran his fingertips over the tracery of silk letters.

'What do they mean?' Merlin asked him.

'Love' he drawled, 'makes ideal dreams.'

‘Oh.’ She caught her breath at the sardonic set to his mouth.

‘Don’t you agree with the sentiment, my dear? You should, when you have the ideal lover who shows you every attention. I’m sure everyone else can see how charmed I am with my moon girl in her silver *kain*. I’m sure they can tell that I can’t wait to be alone with you.’

He couldn’t see the passionate gravity of her eyes as she studied his face and tried to read his expression. Her eyes moved upward to the blaze of his hair against his deep tan ... nothing could be more tormenting than loving a man in whom desire and hate were possibly fused like hot metal. He leaned to her and breathed the spicy scent of the ginger flower in her hair.

‘We will be leaving very soon,’ he murmured. ‘But first there will be a certain ceremony as old as this island, and you will submit to it.’

‘Submit to what?’ she breathed, and felt his hand tighten against her side, near her heart. His lips took the edge of a smile, as if he were enjoying her thrust of alarm.

‘A rite that all island brides are expected to—endure. It won’t be too painful, I assure you.’

‘Paul, you’re making me feel scared.’

‘Really, are you more afraid of these uncomplicated people than you are of your *harimau*?’

‘My tiger,’ she murmured. ‘Will you really devour me, bones and all?’

‘There’s no telling with a tiger, my *kasih pada*. I wonder what a moon girl tastes like?’ He took hold of her hand and carried it to his face, and a moment later Merlin gave an audible gasp as he lightly bit the flesh under her thumb.

‘You taste of rice ball and honey, of watermelon and rum. I’m hungry to take you home to my Tiger House, but first these people must have their fun with you.’

‘Paul, what do you mean?’

He laughed softly against the palm of her hand. ‘Wait and see!’

Merlin didn’t have long to wait, for all at once a group of laughing dancers came running from among the trees, and after throwing wreaths of velvety jasmine about her neck they carried her away from Paul, and she heard him laughing with the other men, ignoring her little cry of fear as she was lifted right off her feet while several of the male dancers wrapped her from head to toe in yards of rose-coloured silk, cocooning her securely, their lean dark faces and slanting eyes alive with the sensuous fun of the performance.

‘Wh-what are you doing?’ she begged of them. ‘Please —Paul!’

Then she saw the faunish face of Lon leaning over her, the firelight giving his features a smiling, demon look. ‘It is the tradition, *mem*. This way long ago the eunuchs carried the favoured slave girl to the master’s bed. The girls and the young men won’t hurt you, but now they are going to carry you to the *tuan’s* bed—hear him laugh, *mem*? How often can a blind man forget like that his blindness?’

For Paul? Yes, anything on earth for Paul, and with a laugh that was half a sob Merlin submitted to the rite and felt herself carried swiftly away from the bonfires, along the lane

of coffee trees, in the direction of the Tiger House.

Laughing among themselves, they carried her up the stairs and along the gallery to Paul's room, where they laid her on the thick silk coverlet of his big teakwood bed ... a princely bed carved all up and down its posts with leaping leopards and twining serpents.

Again for a moment she saw the dark face of Lon leaning over; his eyes were leaping with devilish, silent laughter. Then he was gone and she was left helplessly bound in silk, a gift-wrapped package for Paul to come and unwrap.

Suddenly she gave an irrepressible laugh; it was an absurd game and yet at the same time an erotic one, and she tried to imagine it happening in England, where marriage was treated so matter-of-factly.

The laughter was still on her lips when Paul came to her, when he leaned down and found her silk binding with his strong, sure hands. 'They really had a game with you, *meisje*, eh? You didn't **mind** too much?'

'No, but can you get me out of this cocoon?'

'Let me see—ah, I keep asking for that, don't I? Here we go, you are coming free of the wrapping—like a present for the tiger, eh? A nice little bone for him to get his teeth into.' Paul tossed aside the length of silk and suddenly his hands were upon the *kain* and the little jacket of lace. 'These next, I think.'

Merlin looked up into his face and saw that physical hunger was taking possession of him, but she was unafraid ... there was too much love in her heart and her body for her to be able to resist his touch, which became relentless as he tossed aside the *kebaya* and with urgent fingers tore the silver silk that enclosed her. The fragile straps of her slip were pushed from her shoulders so he could reach her soft warm skin. Softly vibrating, he laid her back on the bed, and unaware in his blindness that the lamps were alight he stripped swiftly to his skin, and Merlin ran her gaze over his golden torso, his strong frame that had a sort of ruthless magnificence as he stood over her a moment, and then reached for her.

She gasped with sheer joy as she felt the strength in his shoulders and sun-burnished arms, so tanned that the crisp hairs on them felt like tiny gold spears.

Her skin was milky in contrast to his, and her lips smouldered beneath his. 'You are lovely, *liefje*, put together with the perfection of a young cat,' he whispered.

'Do you mind very much that I cannot see what I can only feel?'

'There is nothing to mind, Paul, not if you are pleased with me.'

Ja, I am pleased.' He put his lips to her throat. 'Can't you hear me purring?'

Come close, close, little one. Let me feel your heart, for tonight this is where you belong.'

Close, so fused to him that she felt the movement of his heart ... the heart made lonely by months of celibate darkness now breaking into flame as Merlin clung to him, giving of herself with an abandon from her very soul. She melted into him, and her little moan of surrender was primal music, prelude to the sweet pain and rapture, his beautiful name on her lips ... Paul ... Paul ... oh, *Paul*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MERLIN awoke to find herself in Paul's arms, entwined and part of him. He moved and her lips pressed his shoulder, his name a breathless whisper. They had seemed to share the same heartbeat, the same life spring, the same moment of shattering response.

'I could die in you,' he whispered. 'You make me see— for the space of moments I seem to break free of this pall of darkness. You are my little white witch—you cast a spell over me and all I want is the feel of you and the pleasure.'

You make a sybarite of me. I might very well say to the devil with everything and settle for this.'

'Some time we have to eat, Paul.' She moved her hand along the smooth skin of his shoulder, feeling the muscle and bone under her fingers. 'We can't live on—love.'

'But what a way to die!' He buried his lips in her neck. 'I have you at my mercy, you realise that, *liefje*? If I don't let you out of my arms, how will you get away?'

'Being a witch I shall mutter an incantation and in a puff of smoke I shall be free to eat scrambled eggs and toast.'

He laughed against her throat. 'Did I really imagine that being blind made me less of a man?'

'You?' She moved her hand against the muscles of his back. 'You're a marvellous lover—heavenly—I feel so good! I thought—well, you know how some women talk, as if it were the most agonising experience of their lives. It wasn't like that for me. I—I loved my wedding night— and morning.' Merlin felt no shame in confessing the pleasure he had given her—she wanted him to feel ten feet tall, not only because she loved him but because with him the transition from girl to woman had been sheerest bliss and she felt as if her body was made of gold and gossamer; she floated and yet was alive to the very core of her. If for the briefest moment there had been a stab of pain, it had swiftly vanished in the thrilling, sensual, sweet-mad joy of giving herself and being part of him.

She was filled with the breathless miracle of love-making; of being at the side of this man she had loved from a distance, across a chasm there had seemed no way of bridging. Destiny had made this moment; had spun it from gold threads interwoven with black ones. Merlin lived for this alone, of having Paul's arms around her, of feeling his vibrant body a part of hers, his face somehow made younger because last night there had been someone to share the darkness with him, and the rapture that still hummed in their limbs, her smooth slim legs intertwined with his powerful ones.

The dear feel of him was beyond words, and with an incoherent murmur she kissed his throat, his cheek, his beloved eyes ... oh, it might be merciful if she died right now of what she felt. Like other girls she had listened to the marital talk of other people, but it had never been like this when they had spoken so cynically of feeling nothing; that men had the best of it and women merely reaped all the pain and none of the pleasure. Paul had not just taken her, he had made certain that she reached with him the very heights of sensation and wonder ... Merlin hadn't dreamed that her body could feel not just pleasure but an ecstasy of

every nerve, every portion of being, so the thrill of it was still there in her body and her bones. She could have died in Paul, and she had to close her mind to what might be lurking in the shadows when the intoxicant of making love to her wore off for him.

It was too terribly true what she had said to him, they couldn't live on love and had to leave each other's arms before very long.

With a sensuous hunger she was cradled to his body and he kissed her lips, lingering over their curves, moving his mouth against their softness until her hands were gripping him with the gratification of it. 'My moon girl, my fire,' he murmured. 'Lovely soft-skinned little devil. Long silky hair of a witch. *Mijne vrouw, zoet, zoet!*'

He pressed his brow to her and it was suddenly hot and restless, as if the torment had come back that he couldn't see her. She held him and yielded herself completely, totally, letting him feel the love she didn't dare speak of in case he flung at her that she had been the one who had made him blind. She was his and had no existence apart from him ... he'd sworn he would have no children because he couldn't see to guide them, but Merlin had a feeling this was too intense and beyond Paul's control for a child not to happen ... she hoped for it, wildly. When she was the mother of his baby he might forgive her, just a little, if he had evidence that she was the nurse around whose neck the noose had been flung and which in her despair she had made no real attempt to remove. She had let them throttle the protest in her aching throat and had walked from that hospital with all the blame on her young head.

The crying out against it now rose in her throat and suddenly the scream was there. 'Paul... oh, God, I didn't—I didn't!'

He lay very still, his face buried where her heart wildly vibrated under her soft skin.

'You did,' he murmured. 'Darling, you did!'

Her head spun ... the world fell apart ... her face was pale with tension against her unbound hair as he raised himself and she met the unendurable gaze of his blind eyes. There in her side like a knife she felt the passionate pain, and then he gave a laugh that held the shadow of a sigh. '“Since first the Devil threw dice with God”,' he murmured. 'You have read Swinburne?'

'Yes.'

'He had a way of putting it into words, eh? Ironical, is it not, that I burn with desire for you? My body aches with it. I want to kill you, and at the same time I am maddened by you and I actually want to love you I damn you to hell for coming here! Why did you come? To try and make reparation? You always looked a witch, moving about that surgery with those sensuous eyes of yours on all the men—'

'Oh, God, Paul, what are you saying?' She began to twist about in his arms, suddenly desperate to get away from what she longed to be part of—but not like this, the hatred suddenly let loose in him.

'Damned little hedonist!' The words were brutal, scorching, and his face had closed to her, as if the muscles were of iron. She lay there in terrified silence, unable to understand what he was saying—hedonist? She? He had her all wrong—totally wrong!

'It isn't true, Paul.'

'It's true, all right! I had other things to think about in those days, but now it's different, I've nothing else but *this* to think about. Well, you have me for what it's worth, you scheming little bitch! And it will serve while I want you, and you certainly know how to make a man want you! *Ja*, I had heard from my fellow doctors what a treat you were in the car park, but I never dreamed you were this good—that any woman could be this maddening. And if you are wondering, *mijn vrouw*, why I bothered to marry you, it's because I didn't receive Hendrik's wire about you until almost the moment of our marriage, and the priest was there, waiting to perform the service in the salon. Call it my Jesuit upbringing. Call it total cynicism that I should take for my wife the woman who made me blind.'

Merlin gazed at the ravaged bitterness of her husband's face, and when he lifted on to his elbow and she saw the thick hair matted against his moist golden skin, she wanted to reach out to him, and yet dreaded to do so.

She flinched as his hand gripped her by the hair and the hate-tinged desire blazed in his eyes, setting them afire. 'The most astounding surprise was finding you still a virgin. I fully expected you to have lied about that as you have lied about everything else, but on that score it came as quite a—jolt. So you teased men, did you, holding out for a ring on your hand? You have a ring, haven't you, witch? A moonstone with all the fickle fire of your cruel little heart—God, I should put my hands around your throat and choke the breath out of you, here and now—but that would be cutting off my nose to match my useless eyes, would it not? Why do that when it gives me such a degree of pleasure to stroke your slim neck; to make a bit of heaven for myself out of the black hell you made for me. I hate the very thought of the person that you are, but with my hands and my body I crave every silken curve of you, every soft hair and beating vein—I want you, and while I go on wanting you, I shall keep you, but the moment you pall, my sweet, out you go with not a trinket or a stitch I ever put on your body.'

His eyes glittered down at her, like stones set on fire. 'Do I make myself perfectly understood, you teasing bitch?'

Merlin shuddered at the word. 'Paul, you must listen to me.' She choked on the words, swallowed and tried again. 'Please—it wasn't the way you think.'

'I know exactly how it was, so spare me your tear-jerking explanations. I was there, right there, when they got that muck out of my eyes and I couldn't see any more! You damned hellcat, you didn't just blind a man, you blinded someone who was able to be of some use to people who had suffered in fires and road accidents, or who, poor devils, were born with deformed features. Now what am I? A beachcomber on an island, and to live on an island is to be an exile. You will share that with me, every hour of every day and night. You'll pay, my silk-skinned toy! With every nerve in this pretty body of yours, you'll pay me back, if I kill you in the process!'

Merlin lay there and felt as if fingers of iron were digging into her throat and paralysing the muscles. Now she felt as she had done at the inquiry ... now she knew that it

was happening again. He had her irrevocably mixed up with that other nurse, and there was no way she was going to make him reverse his opinion of her. What he had suffered had been too traumatic... he had to blame someone, and here she lay in his arms, utterly at his mercy ... and he was a man without mercy.

The hollows of Merlin's cheeks held tiny shadows of grief ... for just a night she had paid a visit to heaven, and no matter what kind of torment he put her through, there would be no forgetting that during the night he had been carried away as much as she and there had been moments of such shattering tenderness that she couldn't endure to recall them without giving a shaken sob.

'Now you're frightened, aren't you?' he taunted. 'You know now that what was civilized in me has been cut away and all I need from a woman are the basic responses to my touch, and they had better be as warm as they were last night—my God, what a consummate little actress you are!'

'I—I wasn't acting,' she protested. 'I wouldn't know how.'

'Then all the better if I get under your skin, *meisje*. It will hurt all the more when I lash out at you, and it will gratify me that I have the power to hurt you.

How the Inquisitors knew their business The gradual turning of the screw until the victim shrieked for death rather than suffer a moment more of the living agony.'

His words made Merlin wince, and as he rolled over on his back and rested his tousled head on his own pillows, she studied him and wondered how far beneath the surface of his trained and cultured mind lay instincts of a much darker nature. He had been taught by the Jesuits and they were men with beliefs rooted in the inquisitorial past. They believed that suffering saved the soul, and if Paul harboured that same belief, then he would make her suffer for being, as he firmly believed, his tormentress. The woman who like Delilah took his sight and then made him desire her until his hard body was alive with passion and the physical joy was running molten in his veins.

At that very moment when she had felt as if she reached the heights of heaven he had sprung upon her like a tiger ... her nerves gave a wild flutter as his hand lilted and he drew it across his eyes. He frowned, then said quietly, 'I can feel the sun—the morning must be well advanced.'

'The sun is shining right into the room, Paul.' She leaned over and switched off the Han jade lamp on its base that was iridescent as honey.

He heard the click and his lips gave a sardonic twist. 'Has the lamp been on all night?' he asked.

'Yes—I forgot to switch it off—last night.'

'Well, it wouldn't come as too much of a shock for you to see a naked man,' he drawled.

'You—you're my husband.' Colour stormed her cheeks; he made her feel guilty about using the word when she really had every right to use it.

'Are you telling me I am the first man you ever saw—like that?'

'Of course you are.'

'There is no "of course" about it, my dear.'

'Y-you know full well I was a—virgin.'

'Ah, yes, a virgin, but there are ways of making love without a little schemer like you allowing the treasure trove to be plundered. I wonder how rich you imagine I am?'

'I—I've never thought about your money!'

'I'm not a rich man, *mijn vrouw*, but I am quite well off, as they say in England. I was left money by my grandfather; enough, my dear, but hardly a fortune. Are you very disappointed?'

'I couldn't care less if you haven't a bean to your name,' she said tensely.

'Don't tell me you married me for love?' he mocked. 'That would be too much to swallow—I'd choke on it! No, you came here to finish what you started, and all because I was the only man who didn't turn his head each time you swished by in your uniform, which always seemed to fit a little closer to your shape than the uniforms of the other nurses. I had better things to do than to come hither at your beckoning, but these days, and nights, I no longer keep so busy. I now have all the time in the world to give you and you can bank on it, you little she-devil, that I shall not be stinting with my attentions. You really are a young Venus. In fact, my dear, you are sexquisite.'

Merlin flung a hand to her mouth and bit back a cry of protest ... she wanted to deny passionately that she was that petite creature with silky brown hair and matching eyes, who had seduced everyone into believing that she had played no part in the malicious injuring of Paul van Setan. But she had injured him, perhaps more than she had intended, and the incredible part was that Paul now believed she was here on the island, married to him, and in bed beside him!

It was wholly incredible, but it was true. Merlin had been but a shadow to him, and in his total blindness it would be impossible for him to imagine her as a reality. He had clad her in the shape of that other girl, and despite his denial that he had felt attracted to that shapely, seductive nurse, Merlin no longer believed in the truth of his denial.

Paul had noticed the girl but had been too involved in his work to do anything about it, added to which there had been his important position at the hospital which he would never have endangered by having an affair with a member of the staff. His sense of discipline would have enabled him to ignore the girl, and unused to such cool treatment, she had retaliated in an unforgivably spiteful way.

Merlin lay there at his side, torn in two ... the desire he felt was aroused by her ... a desire she needed desperately to share and gratify, and which she might snuff like a candle flame if she tried to make him see that she wasn't the girl he believed her to be. Despite all the cruel pain that girl meant something to him ...

the cruellest thing of all was that Merlin meant absolutely nothing. She was a cipher who had to accept everything or nothing ... to let him call her every bitch in the book, or see him retreat as from a faceless shadow he had never noticed as he went about his work.

Merlin lay racked as if by an exquisite sort of torture dreamed up by the Inquisitors... soul pain had nothing in common with bodily pain, which always seemed to pass. But this

hurled her into the shadowy heart of love, where she groped for a way to be herself in Paul's mind without being suddenly undesired as a woman.

'How quiet you have gone.' He flung out a hand and found her. 'Do you know those lines of Kipling? "A fool there was who made a prayer, To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair"?'

'Yes, I've heard them,' she said, her gaze upon his tanned hand against her creamy skin, the nerves tightening deep inside her as his fingertips moved caressingly across her body.

'They seem appropriate until a man actually touches the object of his prayer.

Who made woman, I wonder, God or the devil?'

'Paul,' She quivered and her fingernails dug into the bed. 'Is there no way—no way at all we can forget the past?'

'Forget?' His hands gripped her, bruisingly. 'I don't want to forget. I want to remember every charming detail of our courtship, for I am a firm believer in the demon mythology. You are the most consummate she-devil who ever pretended to be an angel!'

His hand found her chin and he brought his face down to hers. When his lips touched her mouth her response was uncontrollable as flame and all that mattered was the immolation beyond thought and fear. He made her ache from the vigour of his arms, the fleecing of golden hair against her skin. She trembled, and heard him laugh softly. 'You are a very shapely bone and a hank of hair, so there's no need to shake in my arms. While I feel this cheap craving for your trumpery little body, then you are safe enough from any real harm.'

With these words he pushed her away from him and swung carelessly out of bed, the rays of sunlight full on his powerful, tawny body. He reached lazily for a *tanzan* of dark silk, the masculine house kimono, and Merlin felt her senses swim as she watched him put it on. She loved every inch of him with a melting, unashamed, yet hopeless love, and despite everything it was still a breathless miracle that she, whom men had never noticed, could arouse that hard body to a pitch of sensual excitement so intense that it felt as if they flew off the rim of the earth together.

She couldn't throw it away ... deny herself what she had with him, even if it meant being despised by him. Curled into the embroidered sheets she watched him go into the bathroom that adjoined his room, walking in that deliberate way that could almost fool the stranger into thinking he could see where he was going.

But all the furniture was arranged so he wouldn't bump into it, and when the bathroom door had closed behind him, Merlin allowed herself to look around this room she wanted with all her heart and body to go on sharing with him.

She saw a suite of magnificent furniture carved from jungle timbers, with smooth tigerish markings in the wood and a look of iron firmness. The floor was of natural teakwood, rubbed but unpolished and without a rug to trip Paul's unwary foot. The bed she lay in was kingly, with the leopards and serpents carved deep in the colossal posts that reared to the ceiling. And on the panelled wall facing the bed there was a painting on silk of

an oriental warlord in armour, holding a fierce-looking sword in his hand.

The fierce eyes seemed to look directly at Merlin as she sat up in bed and curled her arms about her up-drawn legs. She brooded there for a few moments, the accusations and the caresses spilling hot and bitter-sweet through her mind. She loved and wanted so desperately to be loved in return ... how wonderful if she could see Paul come through that door with a long adoring smile on his face; a man who wanted her with his heart as much as he wanted her with his body.

A sigh slipped from her half-parted lips and she pushed the tousled silky hair back from her brow. She didn't doubt that she looked as if she had been madly loved ... she gave a little shiver of delight as she remembered the way he had touched her and moved his lips over her skin, moulding her to him as if she were a woman he created for himself out of the darkness and made his own in a way that wasn't possible when the night was over and daylight chilled the warmth into hatred again.

'Paul. ..' She breathed his name like a prayer. Was it possible to live with him under the terms he dictated, knowing he would get pleasure out of calling her a she-devil who had only one thing he wanted. When her body began to lose its charm for him, what then could she expect? Insult without the savage-tender night to heal the hurts? A broken neck ... or just being cast off the island like the cheap goods he had called her?

Could she endure the insults? Could she take the mud he would sling at her for the sake of that high tide of passion his hands and lips and hard body could sweep over her, until she gasped and tingled and clung to him in that swirling cascade of pure emotion?

It was so unutterably sweet and savage ... oh, worth anything!

He came back into the bedroom, his hair damp against his scalp, his golden torso in contrast to dark slub silk trousers. 'I've ordered breakfast,' he said.

'Hot coffee, scrambled eggs beaten with butter, toast, and nectarines. Suit you?'

'Lovely' she breathed, and watched him go to the big dressing-table where he picked up a comb and attempted to tidy his hair.

'M-may I do that?' she asked. 'I know your houseboy usually does it for you, but I suppose ...'

'You suppose correctly,' he said, 'with you like that in my bed.' He came over, sat down beside her on the bed and handed her the comb. She knelt there like his longhaired slave and very carefully combed his shower-damp hair, loving the feel of it, heavy and smooth across his finely shaped head. 'There, I think that's how you like it. Are all Dutchmen as fair as you are, *mynheer*?'

'A good proportion of them.' He seemed to stare at her with his zircon eyes, like grey crystal in his brown face. 'You're a complex bit of goods, aren't you?'

Having you isn't possessing you, is it? You elude my understanding—you put on such an act of being sweet and good. I could shake you until you rattle, do you know that?'

'Yes, I know it,' she said, as she slipped back under the bedcovers. 'Why did you get your cousin to make inquiries about—me?'

'Being blind,' he snapped, 'doesn't turn me into a complete log. You had been a nurse,

and after the typhoon I began to wonder—well, it's done now. All the damage is done and we live together until it's no longer possible for me to tolerate your sweet-voiced lies and the touch of your hand that could put a rice-knife in my throat any time you felt like causing me a bit more agony.'

'Oh, Paul—what a shocking thing to say!'

'For heaven's sake,' he surged to his feet, 'stop damn well pretending that you care for me! What we have in common is a mutual lust.'

'No.'

'Lust, my dear,' he repeated, incising the **word as if on metal**. 'It's a sound Anglo-Saxon word, explicit and to the point. I could take you every time I touch you, and you know it. You bring out the animal in me, and I despise the feeling except that it's such hellfire pleasure having you in my arms. You are my demon, *meisje*, that is why I put the bells on your wrist.'

'Not because.' She glanced down at the bracelet, remembering what he said about wanting to always know that she was close to him in the night.

'No, not for any romantic notion,' he said cuttingly. 'There is no romance attached to what we have in this marriage of ours. None!'

'You say it so forcibly, Paul.'

'I feel it forcibly, my dear.'

'May I see the wire your cousin sent you?'

'Why not?' He went to a great carved bureau and opened a drawer; he returned to her side and dropped the folded telegram slip on the bed. Merlin's fingers shook as she unfolded the paper and read the telegraph. *Your nurse not known under that name. Altered for obvious reasons. Five feet five, trimly built, brown hair and eyes. Must be same girl! Advise instant dismissal!*

Her fingers clenched the wire until the paper crackled. She wanted to deny emphatically that she was the same girl—and yet if she made a denial, then she must add that the hospital committee had accused her and found her guilty.

Would he fall instantly in love with her if he was told such a thing?

Oh God, it was an appalling mix-up of identity and motive. Better to let things stay as they were, for there was nothing to be gained from confession, only everything to be lost.

'Merlin Lakeside always struck me as an impossibly fancy name,' Paul remarked. 'Right out of one of those sugary magazines for the lovelorn. What is your real name—I can't recall it?'

'I'm just—Merlin,' she said. 'Can't we leave it at that?'

'As you wish.' He shrugged his shoulders and went to open the bedroom door as there came the sound of cups and cutlery jingling on a tray. He accepted the tray, murmured his thanks, and brought it across to the bed. 'We will share the food here, if you don't mind?'

'No—but I would like to put on a wrap. I'll fetch one from my own room.'

'You can't go like that! Here, take the tray and I'll fetch your kimono. Can you recall where you laid it down in your room?'

‘It will be on the foot of the bed—Paul, do mind the rug. Last time you—‘

‘Yes,’ he cut in, ‘last time I went head over heels. I’ll be careful, and you can pour the coffee while I’m gone.’

He made his way out of the bedroom and Merlin stared at the door he left ajar.

Paul was conditioned to accept her as the seductive nurse he had been aware of at the hospital, and if Hendrik was fond of a good time he wouldn’t have wasted too much of it in making the inquiries Paul had asked of him. On paper that description of the other nurse also seemed to apply to Merlin, and the real truth could only be proved a truth in Paul’s own heart.

Paul had to discover for himself that Merlin was sincere ... until then there was nothing to be done. She was trapped like a fly in a web, and there were aspects to that web that she didn’t really want to escape ... not yet... not while Paul found her so disturbing to be with.

He returned from along the gallery with her silk kimono and he held it while she enclosed herself in it, watching his face as she tied the sash. The lids of his eyes had that heavy, sensuous look, and she knew what he was remembering as he listened to the rustle of silk about her slim body. ‘I think you are much lovelier than I recollect,’ he said. ‘Like the white oleander with venom in your veins.

May I have my coffee, *meisje?*”

Merlin poured out for him and carefully placed the cup and saucer in his hand, then she served him with a plate of scrambled eggs and toast, and as they ate together the intensity of what she felt for him was all the more precious because there was no assurance that it could last.

‘I think we shall go to the beach today,’ he said. ‘Ah, and by the way, one of the boys will be transferring all your belongings to this apartment, and you will use the other bedroom to sit and read in. I trust you won’t mind?’

‘No, not at all.’ She had sliced a nectarine and shook sugar on to the fruit.

‘What are you going to do about your book, Paul? I can still go on being your secretary.’

‘Yes, but not just yet.’ He casually lit a cheroot and allowed the smoke to drift lazily from his nostrils. ‘I want you just as my wife for the present—you understand me?’

‘Of course.’ A flush that was almost nectarine came into her cheeks. ‘I wouldn’t want you to abandon the book. It’s coming along awfully well.’

‘It’s nothing compared to what I could be doing.’ He rose to his feet and began to pace up and down like a caged animal. ‘The book is just a remedy for what ails me—I want to do what I was trained for, what I do best— oh, God, you bitch, why did you take it all away from me? Why? Just because I wouldn’t take you to bed?’

By God, I’ll take you to bed from now on! You will have more of me than you bargained for!’

‘Paul,’ The fruit seemed to stick in her throat. ‘My dear, what can I say?’

‘For a start you can stop calling me your *dear*,’ he snarled. ‘There is nothing very *dear*

in what I feel for you!’

‘I know, but won’t you believe it was an accident?’

‘It was no accident,’ he said decisively. ‘You know it and I know it, so let us not sweep that under the carpet. I am going to my dressing-room and will be ready to go to the beach in about an hour. The boy will be bringing your things in a short while. *Tot ziens spoedig, beste.*’

He called her his dear so sarcastically, making her wince as the door to his dressing-room closed behind his broad shoulders. Merlin ate her nectarine and it might have been made of wax for all the pleasure it gave her.

So for a while it would appear to everyone on the island that like a normally happy couple they were intent on enjoying a honeymoon. Swimming together, lazing in the sun, taking walks in the forest and maybe collecting velvety wild orchids. It could have been idyllic, Merlin sighed, except for the fact that the bridegroom was not in love with the bride.

THE days that came and went could have been heavenly, but at every opportunity that offered Paul found a way to cut her down, to answer curtly any question she might ask him, to say sardonically that she didn’t have to describe the scenery to him as if he were a tourist.

Merlin tried desperately not to be hurt; she fought to accept the bitter with the sweet ... and there were times when as if out of sheer devilment he was incredibly nice to her, only to turn into a snarling enemy at some unexpected moment.

Down in the *kampong* in front of the islanders he was courtesy itself to her, visiting people he knew, or going in and out of the quaint little shops in the bazaar to look at silks, to sniff the scents, and to handle the brass and copperware all fashioned from hand.

Oh yes, it could have been the happiest time of Merlin’s life, but when they were alone she could never be sure of his mood. It was like being in the company of a tiger, for one minute he would be purring, and the next he would be looking in her direction with that blaze in his eyes that warned her to stop what she was saying, to rise quietly and go swiftly out of the room before he lanced into her the barbed words that left her feeling torn open inside.

At no time did she feel truly relaxed. Even when he made love to her, it was never as wonderful as that first night with him. He merely gave in to a passionate hunger of the body, and when he kissed her it was never with tenderness. He took and saw to it that she gave him everything of herself, and then he would push her away from him, making her feel like a bought woman. As she lay there on her side the tears would creep down her face and she had to let them seep damply into the pillow because she didn’t dare raise her hand to wipe her eyes and so set tinkling the little bells on her wrist. He probably suspected that she wept, but he never remarked on it, and if her eyes were often pink-rimmed at breakfast he couldn’t see them.

As the weeks passed he seemed to have given up any idea of going on with his book, and Merlin didn’t dare to mention it. Gradually, oh, very gradually, like climbing the side of a steep cliff, she became attuned to his moods. She knew when he would go swimming at

dawn, when the sharks were about, hungry and on the lookout for food. On bare feet she would follow him down to the beach, warning Tutup with a finger at her lips not to let on that she was shadowing her husband. Then she would watch him while he swam, the lethal little gun that Lon had given her ever ready in her hand. Lon had given her secret lessons on how to use it; he had told her that it would be enough to aim at a shark if she saw one, that the impact of the bullet hitting the water would distract the beast and give Paul time to swim inshore.

Paul did it on purpose, she knew that. He didn't care a straw if a shark took him, but Merlin did care, with all her heart and soul she cared. He often managed to hurt her feelings, but it made not the slightest dent in her love for him. Maybe love was meant to make some people happy, but in her case it made life a constant hazard, but the strange part was that it had a wondrous effect on her looks.

Hendrik van Setan, whom she didn't much like, had got into the habit of dropping in at the Tiger House for mid-morning coffee, or an after-dinner drink, and he would stand and stare at her, knowing all too well that Paul couldn't see him. Hendrik would run his eyes over her and let the naked admiration show in them. Shallow blue eyes in contrast to Paul's deep grey ones.

One day Hendrik accosted her and suggested that she might enjoy his company for once in preference to that of a man who couldn't tell her just how attractive she was; how softly tanned, and how unusual with her amber and honey-streaked hair and eye. 'You need to be admired,' he informed her. 'Paul doesn't know what he's making love to.'

Merlin had been standing there lost in her thoughts, her fingers entwined around the golden offshoot of a wild orchid. A lovely blue and black butterfly flitted by as these ugly words struck at her. She gave Hendrik a look of open dislike. 'Go to hell,' she said clearly. 'If I told Paul you'd propositioned me, he'd break your neck.'

'He would have to find me first, wouldn't he?' Hendrik mocked, his eyes moving up and down her figure in a cool white dress with a scarlet neck-bow and a matching ribbon tying her hair at the nape of her neck. 'What a fetching creature you are, so outwardly cool and pure-looking, but I know all about you! Paul only married you because no other woman would have him the way he is. For him it's a case of all cats feeling alike in the dark. Tortoiseshell kitten, why the bells?' He caught at her wrist and set her bracelet tinkling. 'Do you bite and scratch when a man strokes you?'

'If you don't let go of me I shall kick!' Merlin had on painted sandals with wedged heels and a kick in the ankle from one of them would be painful.

'I would much prefer a kiss,' he drawled. 'Come, don't put on such a show of outraged chastity. You lost that long before Paul acted the perfect gentleman and legalised your embraces. Tell me, don't you often long to be in the arms of a man who can tell you how beautiful your eyes are? How your hair is fired with streaks of amber in the sunlight? How perfectly smooth your lovely skin is? To poor old Paul you are just a body in the dark—is that why he belled you, so he would know who he was kissing?'

'You beastly man,' Merlin said, a cutting contempt in her voice. 'I would rather have

Paul's curses than your kisses.'

'Does he curse you often, my lovely? He knows what you did to him, doesn't he? Hendrik saw to it that he lives under no illusions about you.'

'Yes, you made sure he wouldn't be happy, didn't you? Are you envious of a blind man?'

'I envy him only one thing and that's you, my girl.' As he spoke he jerked her to him. 'Come, let's see how you react when you give your lips to a man to whom you don't owe the price of a pair of eyes.'

Dreadful words, and made worse by her utter distaste for the thick mouth descending to lay claim to lips only Paul had ever known. Merlin swung her right foot and drove her sandal as hard as possible against Hendrik's left ankle. He yelped and let go of her, and was hopping about on the pathway as Merlin fled away from him.

She ran until she was out of breath, and upon reaching the veranda of the Tiger House she suddenly had to clutch at one of the palm supports as her head swam and the floor seemed to heave under her feet. She felt a sick, faint feeling sweeping over her and put it down to reaction from her encounter with Hendrik.

It was several minutes before the waves of faintness ebbed away, and when Paul came out to join her in a sundowner Merlin had almost regained her composure.

She sat in a rattan long-chair with her drink, while Paul lounged upon the steps with his glass of rum and lime. The clink of ice in the tall glasses was refreshing, and a cool, tangy breeze wafted across the compound.

'There's going to be a huge moon tonight,' she remarked. 'The sun is going down in streaks of pure flame and the moon is already waiting to take over the sky.'

'A moonlight swim would be rather enticing,' Paul said, and there was a seducing quality to his voice that alerted Merlin rather than made her responsive.

When Paul was like this, that suggestion of a purr deep in his throat, she didn't dare let down her defences in case he was playing one of his tiger and doe games with her.

'I suppose it would,' she replied, keeping her voice low and cool. 'If you'd like that, I'll get Tutup to lead you down to the beach.'

'I'd prefer you to take me,' he said, ice clinking as he raised his drink to his lips and took a deep swallow. 'I'm suggesting that we go moon-trail swimming together. Are you in the mood?'

Merlin was in the mood for anything he might suggest, but she was afraid of him and didn't want to be charmed into compliance only to have him turn on her with sudden biting words.

'If you aren't in the mood, say so,' he ordered. 'Don't just sit there moonstruck.'

'How can you tell I'm sitting down?' she asked.

'From the angle of your voice—are you putting me off, *meisje*? Are you unable to swim tonight?'

'No.' She flushed slightly, for there was a very good reason why she could swim any time she liked. 'I—I'd like to come with you, if you really want me to.'

‘Would I ask if I didn’t want your company?’

‘You might, if you meant to.’ She bit her lip. ‘I never know, do I, if it’s me or a whipping-girl that you require?’

‘Tonight, my dear, I require my wife.’ He stood to his full height and saw her flex his wide shoulders. Excitement stirred in the pit of her stomach ... it would be heaven, swimming in the moonlight with him, and afterwards lazing on the silver-lit sands. But she wanted him to be kind ... somehow tonight she wouldn’t be able to bear it if he turned on her and ripped into her.

‘Go and get my swim-shorts and your own suit,’ he said. ‘Don’t forget the beach towels and a rug. I will see Cook about some chicken in a basket, with hot bread rolls in a napkin, and plums.’

‘Oh yes,’ she breathed, excitement mounting in her. ‘And coffee, Paul.’

‘No, wine,’ he corrected her. ‘A white wine like moonlight.’

He went down the veranda steps and made his way round the side of the house to the kitchen quarters. Merlin clenched a hand against her racing heart ... oh, she loved this man, maddening and wonderful by turns. Clever, overbearing, charming beyond words when he wanted to be. Wine like moonlight, only Paul could have said such a thing in his deep-toned Dutchman’s voice, with that trace of an accent.

She hastened indoors and ran up to their room for the swimwear and the towels ... not forgetting the plaid rug Merlin caught her breath ... he wanted his wife, he had said. He wanted her, down there on those silver sands, the wine and the moon mingling to the sea’s music in their veins. Her legs seemed to go oddly weak again and she stood staring at her face in the mirror on the wall, a hand moving across her midriff. Then snatching up the bundle of bathing wear, she ran downstairs, the tiny bells jingling on her wrist.

CHAPTER NINE

MERLIN waited for her husband in the compound, while overhead the moon swung like a great globe coming alight, playing its white fire down through the palm fronds. She breathed the wafting scents of nocturnal forest flowers, and the jasmine stars winking awake now night had fallen. All around her trilled the countless cicadas.

‘Are you there?’ It was Paul approaching her with his firm tread. As he drew near her eyes searched his face and relief made her breathe easier when she saw the faint smile on his mouth. He carried a food basket and there was something rather touching in the way he showed it to her. ‘We have everything, including the wine. Shall we go?’

The stepped path to the beach twisted and turned at odd angles and Merlin held Paul’s arm carefully but firmly, directing his every step of the way. One false move and he could go plunging downwards, and the fact that he would drag her with him wasn’t what worried Merlin. She didn’t want him to be hurt any more, it was an acute relief when they reached the beach and were crunching across the sands together.

The night was achingly beautiful, with the sea running in a frill of creamy surf to the shore, which was fringed by palms and casuarinas—the male and female trees always side by side. The sea was rippling with wide bands of silver beyond the stretch of beach and the rocks that were soaked in moonlight and spume. An idyllic night for a swim, far out into the wonderful ocean, sparkling on the edge of paradise.

They laid the rug and food basket beneath a casuarina tree, and Merlin didn’t need to be shy of Paul as she stripped off her dress and put on her sarong that was backless to the bottom of her spine, falling into a soft border above her slim legs.

It made her feel young and at the same time very female and sensuous. She tied her hair to the crown of her head with her red ribbon, and felt a pang of regret that Paul couldn’t see the way she looked.

Ever since her marriage to Paul, as if she flowered in a storm, she had grown into a woman who was no longer mousey and unnoticeable. She was much in love, and there was no denying that Paul was unstinting with those attentions that were supposed to make a woman take on added bloom.

She had certainly bloomed, and again Merlin pressed a hand to her body and her eyes were eager, hopeful as they dwelt upon Paul in his narrow dark shorts.

How vital his body, how exciting the tawny gleam of his skin. She walked with him across the cool sand in her scanty sarong, nerves prickling as his fingers trailed her bare back.

‘Are you wearing a sarong?’ he asked, and her ears caught the slightly slurred note in his deep voice.

‘Yes, a rather pretty flowered one.’ Merlin took a breath and took the plunge.

‘Would you like to braille me? I’d like you to—to remember me like this.’

He made no reply in words but drew her towards him, and she stood there, melting in every bone, as his sensitive fingertips played over her, feeling the softness of her costume and her skin. At last his hands cupped her face and held it to the moonlight, looking down at

her as if he could-truly see her. 'I swear to myself that I know you, but I don't really know you, do I? You are a mystery, Merlin, that I can't seem to fathom. Shall we swim?'

'Yes.' She caught at his hand. 'The water is glorious in the moonlight, like an enormous cup of sparkling wine.'

They ran together into the sea and gasped in unison at the cool touch of it as they plunged through the surf into the rippling water. It caressed all her body and with little cries of delight she rolled and crawled, and then drew Paul far along a moontrail to where the sea opened out to the distance and the possible danger.

Anything could be out there in the silence of the night, but still they swam, Paul moving at her side to the sound of the little bells on her wrist.

Whenever he swam alone she was always in fear of the sharks or barracuda, but now they were together the fear was diluted to a tiny drop of caution that finally made her say to him: 'I think we should turn back now, Paul. We've swum an awful long way from the shore and it's the kind of night that might bring out a shark on the hunt.'

He lifted his face to the pagan moon and Merlin saw a strange look go across his features, as if for those few silent seconds he debated taking her with him into those lurking jaws that would put an end to the pain and torment of being bound by his body to the woman he accused with his mind.

'Yes, let us turn back.' He curved his body in a trail of phosphorescence.

'Swim ahead of me. I shan't lose you, for I can hear the bells tinkling on your bracelet.'

'Paul, the sea is incandescent with phosphorous,' she said gaily, glad to be swimming back to the shore and away from that moment when he had looked so darkly thoughtful. She could hear him behind her, moving with sure, graceful strokes through the water, and she knew why he was swimming at the rear of her ...

just in case one of those dreadful sea tigers should emerge from the deeps, its fin breaking through the water like a deadly blade that could shear off a leg in the catch of a breath. Merlin moved faster through the water and her tiny bells echoed in the night, quickening Paul behind her.

They emerged from the surf like a pair of silver people, and tiny diamond drops ran from Paul's shoulders into the wet hair of his chest. Merlin gave a laugh and screwed the water out of her hair. 'That was good, but there was peril in it, wasn't there, *mynheer*?'

'There is peril in everything that gives pleasure,' he replied, and when they reached their casuarina tree he demanded a towel and flung it around her. 'Drop your sarong and I'll rub you down so you won't catch a chill.'

It was a vigorous towelling, all the way to her hair, and then she slipped into her beach poncho while Paul used the other towel. She handed him his terry-cloth robe and while he tied it, set out the supper of cold chicken joints, jumbo tomatoes, and rolls that were still warm in the napkin. Paul uncorked the wine and handed her the bottle, and as she poured the wine Merlin thought of the typhoon and the way it had led to this moment on the beach.

'I—I wish we could make a pledge,' she murmured.

‘To what?’ he drawled, his fingers hard around the stem of his wine glass. ‘To our future happiness, *mijn vrouw*?’

‘Isn’t there any hope of that?’ she pleaded. ‘Haven’t I earned a little—forgiveness?’

‘You can see that moon up there.’ He gestured at the sky. ‘Do you think you can reach it?’

‘As hopeless as that for me, Paul.’ Her eyes were huge on his adamant face, anguished and yet proud. She wouldn’t beg any more. She would just accept that it had to be with bitterness that she enjoyed some of the sweetness.

‘I’ll give you a pledge if you must have one, *meisje*.’ He raised his glass so the wine shimmered. ‘The day you give me back my sight, my future as an able human being, then I shall give you my forgiveness. Is it a bargain?’

‘It has to be,’ she murmured, and sank to her knees on the sand. ‘Our supper looks good, Paul. Sit down and let us eat.’

‘Yes, let us eat and drink, and make love, for tomorrow—who knows about tomorrow?’ He tipped back his head and the wine was gone from his glass, which he held out for a refill. His face looked pagan, she thought, as she gave him more wine. His eyes gleamed as if the sea phosphorous had got into them. They ate their chicken, tearing it in their fingers, getting butter from the rolls over their lips. The very pain that underlay the pleasure added a zest to their beach, supper, and afterwards they lay side by side on the rug, her eyes seeing the moon, his eyes seeing only darkness.

The lordly palms reared above them, tall silhouettes against the stunning sky.

The sands all around them shimmered as if polished. Merlin had never been so aware of being mortal ... never so certain that just by a fingertip she had missed finding heaven.

But Paul’s fingertip found her hand in the sand, tracing her palm like a blind seer who already knew her future in advance. ‘You are very deep in reflection,’ he said. ‘Of what are you thinking?’

‘How lovely the island is—as if when Eden vanished a small chunk of it landed here.’

‘And are we the mythical Adam and his Eve?’

‘No, we are Samson and Delilah, aren’t we?’

‘I believe we are,’ he drawled. ‘Waiting for the temple pillars to fall upon us—it was Samson, was it not, who brought down the pillars? To be rid of Delilah once and for all, do you think?’

‘Yes, that must have been the way of it. Desiring her even as he despised her ... the way you despise me.’

‘At this precise moment I imagine you as my moon girl, with your eyes filled with an unearthly glow and your hair all tangled from the sea.’ Merlin saw the taut lines of his mouth as he leaned over her, and his eyes coldly brilliant as diamonds. His hand moved inside her poncho and her own lips parted involuntarily. ‘I feel your heart—why does it beat so fast? Because you wonder when my detestation of what you did to me will overcome my desire for you?’

Well, even you, my Delilah, can’t know what I feel when I hold your slim, sweet,

treacherous body in my arms. Hate and love, those twin souls, are undivided then and I can hold you until I stop thinking and there is nothing but the feeling. Hell goes into hiding and you, my fate, make a heaven for me that I must have.

There's no logic to it. Sometimes I want to end it with my bare hands, and at other times I can't bear to be without you. It's like that right now—has been all the evening. You know it, don't you?

'Yes,' she murmured, but he couldn't see the sadness in her eyes that he should speak of hate even as he drew her to him and she breathed the scent of the sea on his skin and tasted the wine on his lips as they closed slowly and sensuously over hers. She felt the warm rush of love through her veins, the sweet-savage fire merging with the moon, and then there was nothing in the world but the feel of Paul.

Unbelievably here on the sands it was even more wonderful than that first time with him, as if tonight he needed the love more than he needed the hatred.

Such giving, such joy had heaven in it, the pure moon in the sky their only witness, the vibrating surf their music, the sea as deep and mysterious, as high and shining as the waves they crested in their mutual delight.

He lay still, his face buried against her racing heart, his arms locked about her in a passion of possession. He whispered words she couldn't understand, and then slowly they merged into her own language and she caught the sound of her name on his warm lips.

'Merlin ... Merlin ... no moon or stars until I make love to you. Dear God, why you can give me heaven when you've given me hell I just can't seem to fathom.' He moved his flushed brow against her and she could feel the questing torment in him. 'The mystery of you, Merlin, flame and waves and flower sap.

There might be a devil in you, but there's also something of an angel. Oh God, when I hold you like this I feel I could love you, and I dare not love you.'

'Oh, Paul, don't hate me—don't—not after what we felt!'

'I daren't love you,' he said again. 'What other kind of trap would you lay for me if I allowed myself to forget what you really are? You've acted the angel before this in your nursing uniform—oh God, I have to forget it! I have to!'

This time there was violence as well as passion in his kiss, and it was a long time before her mouth and body were free of his merciless vigour. And there was fear in her for what lay inside her, his baby nestled deep in her body. The baby they had made on their wedding night, while the pagan beat of the temple music was still in their veins. She was in no doubt about the night, for nature had an infallible way of telling the time for a woman, and Paul was more potent than the moon, for he now had control of her rhythms.

With a groan he rolled away from her and she pulled the rug over her where the cool moonlight replaced Paul's warmth. The muscles of his back contracted like molten silk and then he lay still, an arm flung backwards, his fingers thrust deep in the sand in a tensile motion.

'Is that love?' he groaned. 'I deny that it's love!'

But Merlin's distress could not be made articulate and she lay silent, her eyes filled

with the moon ... an immense glowing opal of a moon, shining down on a night made for love.

Paul sat up and pulled on his trousers and shirt. He lit a cheroot and the tangy smoke drifted across her face. Suddenly Merlin wanted to shock him into realising she was a woman and not just an object for the slaking of a bitterness he believed to be justified. 'You hate me,' she said, 'but it's more than likely I shall have your baby. I'm not on the pill, you know.'

'A woman of your type?' he grated.

'My type—oh, Paul, why can't I make you see—' She broke off, pain twisting her features.

'That would be harder for you than making me blind.' he said harshly. 'Damn your eyes for being what you are, and if I do get you with a child I shall ensure that you don't keep it. You aren't fit to be a mother, and if you bear a baby of mine I shall send it home to Holland to live with my grandmother. I mean that!'

'Paul,' her hand clenched against her body, 'you couldn't be so cruel!'

'I have learned cruelty from a mistress of the art, my dear, and as it's more than likely that I shall make you conceive, then I shall look forward to the pleasure of taking the baby away from you the moment you give birth. You know that here on this island you have to do as I decree—there isn't a soul who would assist you in holding on to the infant, or of getting away from me so you might have it in England. Oh yes, by all means have a baby, *meisje*. I hadn't realised how I might twist the screw and teach you what it feels like to lose a part of yourself.'

At his awful words a grieving cry was wrung from Merlin. 'You wouldn't do it—you couldn't!'

'Try me, *meisje*. Have a son or daughter of mine and watch me take it from you even as you give it to the light. That would be justice, my dear. I'd delight in it.'

Merlin's mouth was wrenched with pain ... already his baby was inside her and growing each day. Was this why she hadn't told him, because instinct had warned her that he would take away from her that precious scrap of heaven from the one night in her life when Paul had seemed to show her what it might be like to be loved by him. He could deny it till the stars fell out of the sky, but he had loved her that night, and the tiny life she carried was all she had left of any hope of happiness. He wouldn't take her baby from her! It was safe inside her and no one, not a soul except herself, knew that the helpless little thing was there under her heart, growing like a flower from a moment of perfect rapture. It would be a divine baby, something special, because being with Paul that night of the temple dance had been lovely and unflawed. There had been a magic in the air. ...

Just as earlier tonight there had been a magic, until he had let the bitterness come spilling back over the sweetness.

Her eyes blurred with tears and suddenly she couldn't stand it that he had gone and spoiled what had been for a few hours an interlude of sweet romance, as if they truly were lovers who lived for each other and shared an affinity of emotion so fulfilling that they

needed no one but themselves. That was how it had felt in his arms, until he had torn the very roots of tenderness out of his heart and punished her for making him feel tender towards her.

Merlin jumped to her feet, so driven by misery that she was going to run towards the sea and strike out for the crested breakers that were now boiling over the rocks, the tide having turned just as Paul's temper had turned, so that violence had taken the place of the earlier incandescent beauty.

There in the sea she would blot out her agony of heart, the impossibility of making Paul believe in her sincerity. But even as she moved, his senses were alerted to her desperation and he flung out a hand and grabbed her by the ankle, throwing her headlong to the sand. As she landed her outflung right arm struck something sharp, a nearby scorpion shell bristling with sharp points that tore her flesh.

'What has happened?' Paul demanded. 'You gave a cry.'

'I—I've cut my arm on a shell—a rather sharp one.'

'Then it will have to be quickly cleansed or you may get an infection of the blood.'

'I hope I do!' Merlin sat there dabbing at the blood with her handkerchief from the pocket of her poncho. 'Then I shall probably die and you'll have me off your hands without any bother.'

'Now don't talk like a child,' he reproved her. 'Is the cut a deep one?'

'It is rather.' From the amount of bleeding Merlin was inclined to wonder if a vein had been torn. She didn't much care. Maybe like a Roman woman of the past, to whom life had become insupportable, she could let the blood flow away into the sand and sink down gracefully and quietly at Paul's feet.

'Have you fainted?' His hand was groping for her, but with a twist of her body she eluded him.

'I'm a spiteful, scheming harlot, Paul, and I haven't the sensibilities that go with the Victorian vapours. I've seen blood before, even this amount!'

'That cut is bleeding badly?' His voice had sharpened.

'Like a small gusher, but as I said before—so what?'

'You are being very difficult,' he growled. 'Give me your arm this instant and not the backchat!'

'I'm all right, Paul. You don't have to concern yourself for a mere *toy*, which isn't so broken that it can't be mended.'

'Your arm, *meisje*!' His voice menaced and suddenly he had hold of her, and meekly then she permitted him to locate the injury with his fingers. She winced and then watched in stunned silence as he carried her arm to his mouth and began to suck at the wound.

'You mustn't!' she gasped.

'I have just told you,' he spat blood and grit to the sand, 'that you run the risk of an infection, and I wouldn't in my present state perform a very tidy amputation of this slim and delectable arm—oh yes, my girl, it could come to that!'

Now have you something to bind round this?'

‘M-my handkerchief is already a mess.’

‘Then use mine.’ He nicked it out of his pocket and handed her the speckless square of cambric. ‘You should know how to apply a bandage, and make it a fairly tight one to stop some of that bleeding.’

Merlin silently obeyed him, quite unable to forget how he had sucked her arm and created inside her a sensation she still felt ... a totally primitive one. As she tucked in the end of her makeshift bandage she ran her eyes over his face. He was so incredibly complex that he made her head go round. One moment a snarling brute who told her she wasn’t fit to be the mother of his child, and the next minute so concerned for her, to the actual point of using his mouth to draw from the cut any possible contamination from the things which crawled in and out of the shell as it lay on the beach.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured. ‘What you did—it couldn’t have tasted very pleasant.’

‘It wouldn’t be pleasant for you to lose an arm.’

‘I think I’d prefer that to losing my—that is, if I had a baby—in the way you said. You told me I deserved to lose a part of myself.’

‘And that is how you would regard my child, as part of yourself?’ He frowned and fingered her bandaged arm. ‘You seem to have a fund of sweet talk, *meisje*, designed to disarm a man.’

‘Do I disarm you, Paul?’ Her arm had been hurting, but in the most curious way his touch seemed to ease the soreness and she realised anew that the healing in his hands was God-given; that he had been meant to give back to the badly injured a body that was no longer hurt or hideous. It had never been just a matter of good training; Paul possessed that extra something in the very roots of his fingers. Merlin closed her eyes and submitted to his stroking fingers on her arm ... if only she had the power to touch his eyes and make them see again.

‘I am sorry about this,’ he said, ignoring her question. ‘It was my fault you took that tumble, but I sensed you were going to rush headlong into that high tide and as a sightless lifesaver I would not be too proficient. You swim well, my dear, but there are rocks along the shore and those breakers are powerful from the sound of them. You could be smashed like a turtle egg against the rocks.’

‘Would you care, Paul? Would it make you just a little sad if you didn’t have me to chastise with scorpions?’

Ja, there is every probability that I would miss you, you impulsive, maddening little witch. I am but a man and I still haven’t got you out of my veins—how long have we been together? For me time has an odd way of running day into night and I lose count of its passing.’

‘Do you mean how long since I came to the island, *mynheer*?’

‘No, I mean how long have we been man and paramour?’

‘Paramour, Paul?’ she winced at the word.

‘Yes, you are more that than you are a wife. You know what holds us together and when that’s gone—how long, *meisje*, since the night of the temple dance?’

‘Almost twelve weeks, Paul.’

‘I see.’ He was thoughtful a moment and Merlin’s breath caught in her throat as she felt his hand pressing into her waist. He didn’t say anything, but he was a medical man and there was every chance that he detected that slight swell to her contours, and still twisting about in her mind were those things he had threatened with regard to their baby. Merlin loved him with a passion she couldn’t have put into words, but she couldn’t let him take the baby away from her ... she felt it would be easier to die than to see the little thing carried out of her sight and sent away to his unknown grandmother. Oh yes, he would feel himself justified in doing that to her ... it would, as he said, be an exquisite way of getting vengeance for himself.

If only she could make him love her ... if only she could convince him that she would never hurt a man out of sexual vanity as that other nurse had hurt him.

But in his blindness he had convinced himself that she was that vain, cruel, oversexed creature, and at every turn he set out to prove it to himself. Tonight, but a short while ago, making love to her with the sort of violence that type of woman would glory in. Hadn’t he noticed, had he been too carried away to care that she had been unable to respond to him as she had responded to his tenderness? Did it never cross his mind or his heart that she had some compassion and kindness in her?

‘Paul,’ she said quietly, ‘what kind of a woman could you really care for?’

‘One I could trust,’ he said instantly. ‘A woman whose heart would be as cherishable to me as her body. I’m no saint, I don’t pretend to despise my own sensuality with regard to a woman’s body. I’ve never concealed the fact that I need a woman.’

‘But in my case you care only about my—body?’

‘Yes,’ he said shortly.

‘But you don’t really approve of the—feelings I arouse in you. Are the Dutch puritanical deep down?’

‘Some of us have our standards and the Jesuits were my teachers. I have never gone in for wholesale promiscuity, and I react against what you arouse because of who you are. I don’t say I don’t enjoy it, if you must have the truth. You know I enjoy making love to you.’

‘Love?’ she murmured.

‘Euphemistic term, is it not?’ He spoke sardonically. ‘Hardly expressive of the primal feelings involved when a man takes a woman. You enjoy it as much as I do!’

‘Yes.’ Warmth rushed from her breast to her brow. ‘I love it when you’re tender with me.’

‘Love!’ It was his turn to say the word, and he put into it a coldness and scorn that made Merlin flinch as if from a whip.

‘The Jesuits believe in the scourge, don’t they, and the hair shirt. Would you like to put me into a hair shirt, Paul?’

‘It’s what you deserve, but the damnably sweet feel of you in silk is too much for even my sense of discipline.’ Abruptly he drew her to him and kissed her neck and shoulders in the opening of her poncho. ‘Your skin is like cool silk—it grows late, *meisje*, and we must be

getting home.'

'Home is such a lovely word,' she murmured.

'Don't get too fond of my Tiger House.' There was sudden bitterness in his voice even as his lips moved against her as if unable to control the impulse. 'You and I haven't come to a full reckoning as yet, my lovely devil, but it will come, just as the moon pulls the tide on the turn, and the papaya trees drop their fruit.'

The elemental air of this island is like a wine that goes to my head, but one day I shall be cold stone sober about you, Merlin, and I shall throw you out of my life and be free of your skin like cream in my mouth—free of your hair like a chain of silk binding my arms about you. So strange that in my darkness you seem so much lovelier than I remember you. You had a certain obvious glamour when I could see you, but now as I hold you and can't see you, I have an image of a face I must have dreamed of, as a romantic boy. Large eyes with an aching sweetness to them, and a mouth like a soft red flower. That is the fool you make of me—in my blindness! If I had my sight right now—'

He heaved a sigh against her and as Merlin felt the warm rush of his breath she went weak with the impossible longing to give back to him what she had helped to take away. She clasped her arms about him and for once he didn't resist her compassion; he let himself accept it, moving his head in a kind of torment as he let her kiss his eyes.

'I never meant to hurt you, my dear,' she whispered. 'I'd give you my own eyes—the corneas if they could be grafted. Could that be? Is there a possibility?'

He was suddenly very still against her, absorbing the passion of her words.

'No. It was never a case for corneal grafting—come, we must be going from this beach before I begin to believe your sweet lies.'

'No lies, Paul!'

'Then your conscience must be troubling you.'

'Please, don't say that to me!'

'I can say any damn thing I like to you, Merlin. Don't think you soften my heart with your soft body.'

'I never tried to do that. You have me ... any way you want me.'

'As well you know it, *meisje*. Mine to do with as I please, until the final pleasure of being rid of you. Twelve weeks, eh? The time has gone quickly—they say time passes swiftly when the days are pleasant. I can't deny your magic, much as I'd like to.' He gripped her wrist, forgetful of the bandaged cut halfway up her arm, and shook the bells on her bracelet. 'Sweet demon in my tropical garden, what wouldn't I give to look in your eyes and see what they really hold.'

Merlin wished for that as well; for him to see the love in her eyes ... to see her face without that mask he had imposed upon it. To attempt to explain would only anger and bewilder him all the more ... only if he saw her for himself would he at last believe that someone had come to him on this island and given all she had to give, from her heart, with both hands. He might not forgive her for the deception, but he would no longer hate her.

They packed up their moonlight picnic and made their way slowly up the rock

stairway, leaving behind them the rush of the breakers and the awesome glitter of the wide ocean under the pagan moon. They had left words and feelings down there on the sands, a stain of blood from her arm, and the echo of a love cry. Merlin held his arm to her body, warm and strong around her waist ... there was no knowing what he suspected about her condition, but she was resolved not to say anything until there was no way to hide it any more. There was still time to wish and pray and hope that Paul might be softened to the idea of keeping her with him on Pulau-Indah ... that when she had the baby he wouldn't harshly decree a separation from this infant she already loved because it was part of him. He had not taken her crudely, selfishly, and forced this baby upon her ... he had let his body and soul delight in her that night of the temple dancers and the doves; the offerings to the jungle gods, and the scent of tangled flowers out there in the thousand-eyed night.

Merlin lifted her face to the moon and her eyes were large with an aching sweetness and her mouth was like a soft red flower ... she wore the face of Paul's romantic dream, but he couldn't see to know it!

In the days that followed and turned to weeks a change came over Paul and he no longer hurt her with harsh words, or loved her with less than a tender strength. Merlin felt convinced that he knew about the baby, but he never spoke of it, and she didn't dare to speak of it. She took to wearing loose, cool dresses, and because she remained comparatively slim she didn't think that Hendrik noticed her condition, or the boys about the house. Some of the island women might have suspected, but they were graceful, beautifully mannered people who wouldn't intrude their awareness unless she, the *tuan besar's* woman, chose to confide in them.

Her eyes, if possible, grew larger in her thin, softly tanned face, and a certain poignancy had settled about her lips. There were many beautiful evenings on the veranda when she longed to kneel at Paul's side and softly whisper that she was having his baby and was proud and yet terribly afraid that he would truly carry out his threat and deny her right to cherish and nurse this small human being they had made together.

The sensuous throbbing of the tropical night was so conducive to the confiding of secrets ... not that it really was a secret, for Paul had to be aware of the child ... he of all people who knew her so intimately, sharing an apartment with her and a bed. She carried the baby well and was rarely upset in the way of some women. She was proud of this and hoped that Paul was, despite the fact that he never mentioned the giveaway swell to her body when he held her in his arms.

Merlin couldn't fathom his restraint when he had spoken so forcibly of hoping she got pregnant so he could enjoy the pleasure of her pain when he took away from her something that was part of her.

He knew she was carrying a baby! He showed it in his lovemaking, treating her with such infinite gentleness that sometimes she would find herself crying in his arms, aching in her very bones for him to say there was no more room for bitterness and they would share what they had and try to put the cruel past out of their lives.

But no, with adamant determination he kept his deepest feelings to himself and

Merlin had to find some joy and gratitude in the fact that he no longer snarled at her in a sudden attack of anger, or was nice only to suddenly become nasty. One evening she dared to mention his book and suggested they carry on with it.

'No,' he said, and he leaned against the piano where she had been softly playing in the candlelight. Cheroot smoke made patterns around the flames of the candles and Paul's face above the white material of his tropical dinner jacket was stern without being remotely cruel. 'I don't want you sitting at a typewriter for hours on end, listening to those medical terms as I dictate them. You aren't my secretary any longer, are you?'

'Your paramour, Paul?' she said, running her fingers along the keyboard of the piano.

'No, the wife of the blind man, for what it's worth,' he growled, and then he walked out of the open glass door into the garden, moving at night with that strange instinct that made him seem almost sighted. Merlin stayed very still on the playing stool and listened as his footfalls died away and the sound of the cicadas filled in the silence that followed. He would walk in the forest with a fearless disregard of what hunted there, and she would remain here in this room and die a little with each passing second. Paul knew he was to be a father and he was blind and it was that, rather than hatred of her body harbouring his child, that made it something he wouldn't speak about. He was in his middle thirties and ready for the responsibility of becoming a parent ... but not like this! Tied to a woman he neither trusted nor truly loved; a sightless man who craved to be a man of purpose, with an important and satisfying role to play in his world of restoration surgery. He had been one of its leaders; he cared passionately for the mutilated people he had helped, and needed desperately to use his great skill.

It broke Merlin's heart in pieces that she could only give him comfort when he came to her and silently took it. That he needed her was something to cherish, and that the bitter violence had gone out of him was something to rejoice in.

In order to try and close her mind to Paul out there in the forest that was so menacing at night, Merlin played to herself a soft and sentimental song from far-off days ... Dream, when you're feeling blue. Dream and it might come true. ..

Chords crashed and she leapt to her feet, feeling the jump of her heart as if her baby moved. Snatching at the full skirt of her jade-green dress in softest shantung with wide elbow sleeves edged in creamy lace, she went out into the garden. Tonight the moon was full again and when she reached the compound each tree seemed to stand in a pool of silver and she could see the enormous moon-moths flying about, their wings faintly green and iridescent. The air was laden with the scent of tea-bushes, and the *laan* into the forest was hung with pale bellflower, rose of Sharon, mauve hibiscus that in the moonlight looked like dark velvet. She walked beneath the curving branches of the banyans, the spirit trees, her arms brushed by golden-bird orchids in big fragrant sprays. Clusters of living stars cascaded down huge tree trunks, elephant-ear leaves waved against her as she passed, and the path itself was silver striped by the moon slanting down through the treetops.

She wanted to be with Paul... it terrified her, the mood of pained regret that had made him walk out into the night as if he didn't care what became of him.

She cared, with a passion that burned blindingly in her eyes so she had walked into a thorn bush before she could stop herself, feeling the silk of her dress catch on the jungle barbs. They held on to her dress and ripped it as she tried to struggle free, wincing as the barbs scratched her hands. All around her brooded the iron trees with scarlet flowers, the yellow champac and the raintrees with long green tresses hanging down into the deep lakes of fern. Huge liana stems gave off an earthy scent and Merlin felt the menace of the night and the strange noises seething in secret places, and the silk of her dress gave rippingly all down the side of her leg as she forced herself away from the nail bush.

She stood there a moment, feeling the thud of her heart, and wished now that she hadn't obeyed her impulse to try and follow Paul. Though blind he knew his way better than she did along this *laan* that led to the *ham-pong*, and she stood hesitant and decided that she had better turn and go back to the house.

It was then that the nightmare began ... then that she caught the sound of someone crashing through the dense foliage at one side of the *laan* ... that someone came out on the path ahead of her and a shafting beam of moonlight fell upon the dark, panting figure. Merlin stood petrified as the moon struck the blade of the *parang* in the man's hand ... he was holding it aloft and his eyes were crazed in his dark face, and then he started towards her and she knew he was going to cut her down with that deadly blade that could slice through the thick sugar- canes with such ease.

A native gone amok, and there seemed no escape as he sprang at her and she heard the scream rip from her lips ... and in that same instant felt the strong thrust of a hand that sent her spinning to one side as the deadly *parang* came slicing down into a white-clad arm.

Paul ... taking her place in the path of the madman and suffering the slash of the blade on his upraised arm.

How it happened, how it could be, was all part of the nightmare until Merlin caught the sound of voices and people rushing upon the scene and someone crying out that *mem* had been right there and the *parang* would have crashed into her skull. Now the cutting knife was on the ground and the villagers had the madman struggling in a hunting net, and in her torn skirt Merlin ran to Paul, who stood rocking on his feet, clutching his arm, the blood gushing on to the white material of his dinner- jacket. Lon was there and it was he who had warned Paul that of a villager was running amok with a *parang* ... they had found her gone from the house and had come to find her.

Her scream had triggered Paul's swift reaction, and she was ashen-faced but firmly in control of herself as she and Lon helped Paul along the *laan* to the house. Once there they had to act with speed to stem that awful flow of blood, and with every atom of remembered nursing skill Merlin applied pressure binding to that dreadful slash in her husband's arm.

'Meisje?' he murmured. 'You are all right, *ja*.'

'I'm fine, my dear.' She stroked the moist hair from his brow and knew from the drawn lines of his shadowed mouth that he was in great pain. She returned to Lon and quietly asked him if it was possible that there was any morphine on the island. There was a

dispensary down in the *kampong* and Lon ran off like a young stag to see what he could find to relieve some of the shock and pain for Paul.

Merlin knew the injury was a grave one, and when Hendrik came hurrying in, roused from sleep and wearing his robe over bare legs, Merlin told him that Paul would have to be taken to the mainland at once for hospital treatment.

Hendrik stared at his cousin, and then turned to pour himself a stiff brandy.

'My God,' he said. 'That arm—how it's bled!'

Paul's shirt was scarlet, and his coat on the floor was sticky with blood. Merlin swayed a little and then took a firm grip on herself. She didn't dare buckle under, for it was obvious that Hendrik wasn't a stout rudder in a storm and she was going to need every nerve in her body, every bit of grit in her to help Paul... her Paul, who had saved her life out there on the path, stepping in her place and accepting that fearful blade through his flesh and bone.

There was no morphine available, much to her distress, but Lon brought something from one of the temple priests that he said would ease the worst of the pain. It was a whitish liquid in a small gourd, obviously a drug of some sort prepared from wild poppy or mandragora root, but Merlin didn't hesitate to pour a measure of it into a glass and give it to Paul. After only a few seconds it made him drowsy and the tension in his face began to relax. 'Opium,' he murmured, and his lips quirked. 'Thanks to heaven you don't lose your head—you have realised that I am almost amputated?'

'No!' She put her hand over his lips. 'Lon is preparing the helicopter and he's going to land it in the compound —yes, I know it's dangerous, but he wants to do it. He loves you.' She swallowed the scalding lump in her throat and hung on tightly to her control. 'All of us do— we're going to fly you straight to hospital and I won't let you lose your precious arm. I won't, Paul, I promise you!'

His face against the cushions of the couch was a mask of shadows, and then the lids of his eyes closed in several hard blinks, as if he were fighting with tears. Merlin leaned forward and kissed his face. 'You're so brave, my dear. Be brave a little longer. ...'

His eyelids lifted and again he blinked, as if the opium was making him feel dizzy. 'Angel face,' he said, and his head fell sideways on the cushion, and his eyes closed heavily ... deliriously.

He was sleeping a little and Merlin was thankful for it. She accepted a glass of hot milk and brandy from one of the boys, and another brought her a cloak from her wardrobe; the huge blue one embroidered with a peacock on the shoulders, which Paul had had made for her down in the *kampong*. It was somehow incongruous for this desperate flight to the mainland, and yet also in a strange way it was appropriate ... the wings of the bird stretched out with her feelings, as if she would carry Paul in her very arms.

Hendrik was leaning forward in his chair, staring at the floor. 'You love him like hell, don't you?' he muttered. 'That girl of mine, Sarinha, she thinks you're having a kid. Is it true?'

Merlin hesitated, then inclined her head.

'What do you think he'll do about it when you tell him? I bet you haven't told him, eh?'

'I—I was waiting for the right moment, as most women do,' she said defensively.

'I lied to him about you.' Hendrik said suddenly. 'I was green with envy when I got here and saw the girl he'd got for himself, even though he couldn't see one little bit of you. One evening in his den he asked me to describe you to him, and as I had the impression that he took you for that other nurse involved in his case, I described her to him just as I'd seen her in a newspaper picture—pretty, I said, but a trifle on the common side; the sort who would be out to grab a well-off surgeon for herself. Paul then pointed out that he was blind and no longer much of a catch. I said that was nonsense. He was still Paul van Setan and his reputation as a surgeon wasn't impaired. He was still a good catch for a girl who wanted to get on socially—anyway, to cut a long story short, I had him believing you were a little climber with a meretricious sort of attraction, and I could tell he didn't like it.'

Hendrik frowned and studied his sleeping cousin, his arm bound and held in a shoulder sling, gold hair darkened with sweat, the stains of blood all over his shirt. Hendrik swallowed audibly. 'I've always envied him, do you know that?

He was the one with the brains and the brilliance, and even when it came to getting a girl, he got you. It said in the newspaper that a girl named Jane Bridges had been found responsible for the damage to Paul's eyes—were you Jane Bridges?'

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'In those days. Bridges was my stepfather's name and I used it to please my mother. Jane is my second name and I thought it more suitable for me than Merlin.'

'More suitable?' Hendrik took her up. 'You don't imagine you are a plain Jane, do you? I don't think I've ever seen a sweeter face than yours in all my life—to hell with it, will Paul be all right?'

'He has to be, if there's any justice.' Her face twisted with pain and her eyes filled with tears. 'Things might have worked for Paul and me, if you hadn't lied to him. I hope you pay for that!'

'I shall,' Hendrik growled. 'All my life I shall never be fortunate enough to meet someone like you—you truly are a splendid girl, Merlin. Even the way he is, Paul has the best of it—he has you, and a baby to go with you. He's had quite a bit of heaven when you come to think of it!'

They heard the chugging of the helicopter coming up from the beach to the compound, and Merlin felt her nerves tighten. Lon was risking his life landing in moonlight in a somewhat restricted area, but they couldn't take Paul down those rock stairs to the beach, weakened by loss of blood already, with his system deeply shocked.

'Tell me,' Hendrik had risen and now he stood over her, his eyes probing her anxious face, 'were you responsible for making Paul blind?'

She shook her head. 'Can't you guess who was?' she asked quietly.

'The other one, eh? And Paul knew this?'

'He suspected it.'

'And I let him believe that's who you are?'

'Yes, Hendrik.'

‘God, you must want to see me dead at his feet!’

‘It would give me a certain satisfaction,’ she agreed. ‘But cruel people are their own worst enemies. They have to live inside themselves with what they are. It’s the kind of company I wouldn’t want.’

Hendrik drew a ragged breath, then went to the cabinet for another drink.

Merlin no longer bothered with him, but leaned over Paul and carefully checked his pulsebeat. It was jumpy and his skin was cool under the moisture, extra cold about his lips. She wiped his face, and listened as the helicopter came in lower and lower, holding her breath until it had settled without mishap on the hard surface of the compound. Thank God! A landing was always more hazardous than a lift off, and they could now hope for a speedy flight to the mainland, which Lon would already have radioed to have standing by an ambulance and a doctor.

Carefully, so very lovingly and carefully was Paul handed into the helicopter and a blanket rucked around him, his head at rest on Merlin’s shoulder. His breathing was shallow and she didn’t dare to contemplate just how much shock he had suffered, nor how much damage had been done to his arm. She hoped for a miracle ... prayed there would be someone skilful enough at the mainland hospital to save his arm.

Dear God, he had lost enough for one life!

But for Paul she would have had her head crushed in. He had saved her life, this man who swore he hated her!

They chugged through the moonlit sky, above the glimmering ocean, and though Paul stirred out of his lethargy once or twice, for most of the journey he slept with his head against Merlin.

‘How is the *tuan*?’ Lon asked, as they came in over the glittering lights of the harbour and he made for the airfield where all those months ago Merlin had stood and longed with apprehension to see Paul... whom she hadn’t dreamed she would end by marrying.

‘He’s in shock,’ she replied. ‘The opium has helped the pain, but he’s lost such a lot of blood.’

‘The ambulance will be waiting,’ he assured her. ‘The doctors are good ones—they will do their best for him. *Mem*, a tiger doesn’t die so very easily.’

‘My dearest *Sang Harimau*,’ she murmured. ‘If he dies, then I think I shall—I have that container of opium in my bag. There’s enough!’

‘You have a baby in your body,’ Lon said sternly. ‘The *tuan*’s baby, who deserves to live. When we land you will give back the opium to me, or I shall tell the authorities you have it.’

‘You wouldn’t.’ She gave Lon a pained look.

‘The *tuan* got cut down for you, *mem*, and you will have his baby if I have to lock you in a room and keep guard on you.’

‘Lon!’

‘Be one fine baby,’ Lon smiled faintly, with an affectionate glance at Paul. ‘Real tiger

cub, if a boy. Did you think you could keep that from the island people, eh?’

‘Not really—has the *tuan*—has he mentioned the baby to you, Lon?’

Lon shook his head. ‘Why do you try to keep it a secret?’

‘Because he—he doesn’t care for me,’ she said huskily. ‘You know as well as I that love doesn’t always make babies.’

‘Love made yours, *mem*. You loved that man the day I met you fly this very airfield, and I never believed you ever hurt him.’

‘You seem to know a lot of things, Lon.’

He gave her a faintly wicked wink, and then concentrated on landing the scarlet and white bubble that had flown her to a strange heaven, and was now bringing her to face despair or a possible miracle. As the rotors ceased to spin, they heard the ambulance wailing up the airstrip, and at that moment Paul stirred against Merlin and opened his eyes. He seemed to look right up at her, long and silently. ‘How do you feel, my dear?’ she asked softly. ‘Are you in pain?’

‘It’s bearable,’ he said, and his eyes went on staring at her. Lon slid open the doors of the helicopter and the ambulance halted only a few yards away. They took charge, these other people who would now help Paul, and Merlin stood on the airfield, shivering intermittently with nervous fears as Paul was carried from the helicopter into the ambulance. She clutched the big cloak around her and lifted her face to that great ivory moon and wondered if she would ever see it shining again over Pulau-Indah.

‘Madame van Setan,’ it was the doctor calling to her, ‘your husband requests that you come with us to the hospital.’

‘I’m coming,’ she made quickly for the open doors and was assisted inside.

Only then did she realise that Lon had quietly removed her bag from her hand ... there was to be no easy escape from the trauma that awaited her. Paul was desperately hurt and he might not fight to live if he knew he was going to lose his arm as well as his sight. He had her... but did he love her enough to live for her?

The ambulance siren started up again and Merlin felt Paul’s baby move inside her as they sped off into the night, making swiftly for the hospital. Merlin informed the Indonesian doctor that her husband had been given opium for the pain, and he merely quirked an eyebrow and seemed quite unshocked. ‘It will do no harm,’ he said. ‘This once!’

Merlin had prayed for a miracle, but in the early hours of the next morning it seemed there wasn’t going to be one. There was no saving Paul’s arm below the elbow; he had known himself that it was almost cut through by that mad blow from the *parang*. Merlin gave a stricken cry and covered her face when they told her ... and then the surgeon who had worked on Paul sat down beside her and took her hands down from her ashen face.

‘Madame van Setan, would you like me tell you what your good husband has in place of that lost arm?’ He quietly smiled at her. ‘It’s a most amazing thing, and we have been in touch with the ophthalmic people in England who were in charge of him at the time of the accident to his eyes ... were you aware that there was no drastic damage to the eyes themselves; that his blindness was caused entirely by a shock reaction so bad that the optic

nerves literally curled up and refused to function? Do you understand what I am saying, madame? Your husband is no longer blind. What he suffered last night acted as a traumatic release for him and he started to see again—not clearly, for that will take time—but he could make out the lights in the operating room, and he told me that he had seen your face for blurred moments in the ambulance coming here.

‘Madame,’ the surgeon reached out and took firm hold of Merlin’s trembling hands, ‘you must believe what I am telling you and not look at me in that terribly stunned way. Mynheer van Setan is regaining his sight again, and each day it will become a little clearer ... he has lost most of his left arm, but he has what is far more precious to all of us, he can see again.’

It was unbelievable ... it was wonderful ... and the young nurse who looked after Merlin said she cried for a solid hour before they could get her to slowly turn off those streaming, thankful tears. After that she drank four cups of hot sweet tea, and they put her to bed in a hospital cot, carefully removing the torn dress from her slim pregnant body and pulling the covers to her chin. Her great eyes were like brown violas that had been drenched in a storm, and then she slept... they told her she slept for twenty-four hours.

It was Lon, that good friend of hers who seemed capable of anything he set his mind to, who went out shopping for her and brought back new lingerie and tights, a cream linen dress with eyelet embroidery in the collar, and a pair of T-strapped cream linen sandals. He returned her handbag to her, so she was able to hide some of her pallor behind a dash of make-up.

‘I’m scared, Lon,’ she said shakily. ‘What’s Paul going to say to me—I shall seem like a stranger to him.’

‘But a very lovely-looking one,’ Lon told her. He took her hands and kissed them, and he was watching her as she walked alone into the room where Paul was propped up in bed, waiting for her. For long moments they just looked at each other, then he held out his hand and she went to him, a quiver going all through her as his strong fingers closed on hers.

‘They told me my wife was coming to see me,’ he drawled. ‘Do I know you?’

Who are you?’

‘Me?’ She lifted his hand to her face. ‘Close your eyes and braille me.’

He did so, moving his beloved fingers over her features to her throat. ‘Ah yes, now I seem to have some recollection of this madly pretty creature who walks into my sickroom and gives me such a shock.’ He slowly opened his grey eyes and slowly smiled at her. He let his eyes travel every inch of her face, and then her figure, his gaze coming to rest on her waistline. ‘Mine as well?’ he murmured.

‘Do you really have to ask, *tuanku*?’ Merlin’s confidence was coming back to her, for never had Paul smiled like that... even with that heavily bandaged arm stump, he was looking ... wonderful. The nurse had combed his hair into that smooth weight across his strong brow, and his eyes ... his eyes looked as if they loved her

‘No, I don’t need to ask.’ His smile grew a shade wicked. ‘But I have to get used to having a lovely stranger for a wife, someone I know better in the dark than in the daylight.’

Ah, my senses told me you were like this, but I kept masking your face with someone else's, didn't I?

'Yes, Paul, but can't we forget?'

'No, we have to speak of it, for I've hurt you more than once in my blindness, and I don't quite know how to repay you.'

'My darling,' she pressed his hand to her cheek, 'I'm repaid a thousand times over. You can see again, and you saved my life. If you want me, what more could I want?'

'To be made supremely happy, and I intend to set about it as soon as they discharge me from this place. Ah, but it's incredible to see your lovely face like a distant dream come true. You were the one they said hurt me— everything is clearer now—you never hurt me, of course, it was that other creature. Why did you never try to explain to me who you were?'

'Would you have listened, Paul?' She gave him a shaky smile. 'You needed someone to whip, and you always kissed me afterwards. I understood and I loved you enough to take it. It would have been all right if you had killed me.'

'That much?' he groaned.

'All the way, Paul, to heaven and hell.'

'The hell of it is over, my sweet child, from now on it's heaven all the way, I promise you. Won't you kiss me? At the present time, dammit, I am having a bit of bother with this stump, but they tell me they are going to make me a new arm, and it had better be the sort I can put around you!'

Merlin leaned over and **laid her** lips to his; she saw him close his eyes as she kissed **him** and she knew he was recalling every detail of **their life** together on the island. His mouth clung to hers **and** his good arm locked itself about her waist ... about the baby they had made with love ... it had been love, as she had always hoped and known in the depths of her heart. He had loved her enough to live for her.

'You are truly named Merlin,' he breathed. 'You have made magic for me—I have love, I have my sight, and soon, eh, I shall have a son or a daughter. How do I thank you, *meisje*?'

'Loving someone, Paul, means never having to say thank you with words—just show me you love me and I'll be so very happy.'

And Paul was there to witness another kind of miracle when his pretty, brown-haired daughter came into the world. But for a few days after the event he seemed on edge, a shadow of anxiety in his eyes ... a shadow that didn't vanish until the baby suddenly opened her eyes and they were huge, golden-brown like Merlin's. They dwelt on Paul and a tiny hand reached out to him and he kissed each one of the fragile fingers. 'We shall call her Indah, for beautiful,' he smiled at his wife. 'Indah after an island where a tiger was wooed and tamed to the hand of a most charming young woman.'

'Are you entirely tamed, my tiger?' Merlin asked him, smiling.

'Not when you smile at me, *liefje*. The tiger prowls again in my blood when you speak my name.'

‘Paul ... dearest Paul, I shall speak your name as often as possible.’

His eyes moved lovingly over her face and the baby nestling in her arms.

‘We shall visit our island in the autumn,’ he promised, ‘but soon I go back to being a working man. Regretfully my days as a surgeon are over, but now I can do what has always interested me, research into the rejection of skin and bone grafts. I can be of use again, my Merlin! I can be a protective husband to you and I can look after my daughter and ensure that she never wants for guidance and love. I am a very happy man this day, *mijn vrouw*. I thank God for what I have.’

The sun shone into the room and Merlin watched as

Paul half-closed his eyes in sensuous appreciation of it... able to see its golden wonder ... her tiger in the sun.